

NEW ZEALAND BIOGRAPHY IN THE 1940S AND THE 1990S:

A COMPARATIVE VIEW

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is intellectual and literary history within New Zealand biography. Its central argument is that biographical writing changes over time because each era has new questions and needs concerning the intersection of history, society and individual experience which the genre of biography feeds. In order to study the changes in New Zealand biographical writing over the second half of the twentieth century, the two centennial decades of the 1940s and the 1990s have been chosen as periods of contrast, when an increase in national consciousness led to an upsurge in the writing of biography, and differences in biographical practice between the two decades were able to be identified. The topic has been divided into three main themes: biographies of 'Great Men'; biographies of 'Women Too'; and biographies of 'Significant Others'. Within each theme three biographies have been selected, one from the 1940s and two from the 1990s, and each discussed in discursive essays that delineate their main biographical concerns. The general characteristics of the biographies have then been evaluated within certain biographical principles that include: the choice and treatment of the subject, the relationship between the subject and the biographer, ethical concerns, the availability of sources, and the varieties of form. This made it possible to identify developments that took place in biographical writing between the two decades.

The changes that were most evident were: an expansion in the range of subjects; greater impartiality by the biographers towards their subjects; the increase in availability of sources; the inclusion of greater detail in the fuller portrayal of a life; an increase in the professionalism of biographical writing; a conservative attitude towards the greater variety of acceptable forms.

Initial assumptions were that biographical writing would develop in a straightforward manner changed by a maturing national consciousness and by trends in contemporary literary history. But it was not as simple as that. There were found to be similarities between biographies from the two decades, as well as differences. For every

generalization that could be made, in this relatively small study, there were exceptions. While the selected case studies were all representative of types, all types were not represented. Nevertheless, those that were selected served to illustrate many of the changes in biographical writing in New Zealand that occurred during the fifty years under review. These changes were part of a general biographical approach that spanned a wide range of disciplines.

PREFACE

Biography may be defined as the narrative dramatization of credible evidence about another person's life. It can be classed as history because it is concerned in most cases with personalities who either have had a real influence on international, national or local affairs, or if they have had no such influence, can at least be regarded as types of certain social groups or classes.¹ As history, it must be governed by a desire to tell the truth as far as it can be ascertained. As a branch of literature, it should also be judged as art. Biography, therefore, strives to be precise, rational and scientific; and at the same time intuitive and imaginative. The continual need to reconcile these two irreconcilable elements constitutes the greatest practical problem of writing biography, and is inherent in the form itself.²

The purpose of this study is to analyse developments in the writing of New Zealand biography between the two centennial decades of the 1940s and the 1990s. These decades have been chosen because the centennial commemorations invoked a heightened sense of national consciousness and a number of biographies were specially commissioned to mark those occasions. The analysis entails an exploration of the general characteristics of a representative corpus of works published during those two decades, the consideration of them within certain biographical principles, and a comparison of them historically.

As far as the scope and limitations of the study are concerned, no philosophical debate about the value of biography to historiography will be addressed. Only 'serious' forms of biography (such as those of explorers, politicians, soldiers, missionaries, for example) rather than 'popular' forms (such as those of film-stars or sports stars, which tend to be more trivial) will be considered. Neither autobiography nor memoir will be studied. Nor will biography of or by Maori, despite the fact that race relations are so central a theme in New Zealand history. Maori cultural identity is very different and separate from that of

¹ Gilbert Garraghan, *Guide to Historical Method*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1948, p.113

² Peter Alexander, 'Biography: A Case for the Defence', *National Biographies and National Identity*, Iain McCalman, ed., Canberra: The Australian National University, 1996, p.78

Pakeha, biographical writing is traditionally a Pakeha genre, and no major Maori biographies were written during the two decades under review.

The biographies that have been selected here as case studies have been chosen in order to delineate the main concerns of biographical writing that have contributed to changes in the form in New Zealand over fifty years. Interpretative readings of the case studies are presented as discursive essays, considering the historical contexts of the subjects and authors, and those features that are most influential in shaping both the biographies and the readers' experience. The works have been divided into three major themes in order to differentiate particular developments: 'Great Men', 'Women Too', and 'Significant Others'. Each theme considers three case studies, one from the 1940s and two from the 1990s. Most of the case studies are presented within a simple analytical template of: historical background, subject, author, text and criticism. In the last chapter they are evaluated against general biographical principles, outlined in chapter one, that reflect upon the various forces, constraints, or decisions which together form any story that is told about a life. Finally, conclusions are drawn concerning the changes that are part of the development in biographical writing in New Zealand over the second half of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

The culture of New Zealand was built upon the principles of its British founders, educated capitalists who comprised a significant part of the colonial population. They were highly literate and their cultural values, which they were determined to maintain, affected the way the colonizers wrote. It helped to produce a kind of writing that was artificial, reflecting the values of the culture from which it was derived, and this, for nearly one hundred years, hindered the development of an indigenous New Zealand literature.³ In contrast to Australia's intellectual or cultural history, whose national tradition was born in the 1890s, New Zealand developed no such distinctive literature at that time. According to J.O.C. Phillips, from the beginning of European settlement through the first three decades of the twentieth century, New Zealand high culture was largely provincial, imitative and undistinguished.⁴ This provincialism was the vehicle by which the Romantic basis of settlement was carried on, while isolation caused New Zealand to be cut off from the developing trends in modernist Britain. It was not until the 1930s that writers began to establish a national tradition based upon their emerging awareness of a distinctive New Zealand culture. Against this literary background, biographical writing, with its British tradition but comparatively shallow roots in New Zealand soil began to develop.

Writing about the lives of human beings has a long history in western civilization that goes as far back as the ancient Greeks and Romans. During those classical times it had the didactic purpose of portraying character in order to provide readers with paradigms of

³ Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*, Auckland: Penguin, 1990, pp.17-18

⁴ J.O.C. Phillips, 'Musings in Maoriland – Or Was there a *Bulletin* School in New Zealand', *Historical Studies*, October 1983; 20(81): 520

behaviour to imitate or to avoid⁵. Plutarch was the most influential of the ancient Greek biographers. All writers, up until the end of the eighteenth century, looked back to his Lives as a model for their biographical studies⁶. Influenced by currents typical of the first century, which originated in areas of philosophy and rhetoric, Plutarch focused more on personality than on individual action, adapting historical sources to his aim of using the portrayal of human character as the basis of moral instruction.⁷ Seutonius, the Roman, in his The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, written in the second century A.D., is less moralistic and didactic, enabling him to deal with his subjects more comprehensively. He regards them with admiring detachment, avoids comment and value judgments, and includes more personal detail. It was Seutonius rather than Plutarch who represented what was new in the genre as it developed in the eighteenth century and had an impact on some of the greatest writers of that time.⁸

Meanwhile George Cavendish, in the sixteenth century, wrote The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey, which he began in 1554, twenty-four years after the occurrence of the events that he recorded as an eyewitness. He composed his work around a definite theme, to illustrate the mutability of human fortunes. This new approach to biography was influenced by the philosophical development of the concept of the individual in history that concerned the rise and fall of a great figure through fate. The emphasis of curiosity had shifted from the subject as a type (representative of institutions) to the subject as an individual (representative of personality). More interest was shown in the internal than the external aspects of the subject, and he was portrayed from the point of view of character rather than from action. It was due to works such as this that English biography was first differentiated as a species of literary composition, distinct from history and romance, which pointed to the future scholarship of biography⁹.

James Boswell's Life of Johnson, published in 1791 is considered to herald the modern age of biography. Samuel Johnson, the author of Life of Savage, was himself a noted and

⁵ J.L. Moles, introduction to Life of Cicero, Plutarch, Wiltshire, U.K.: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1988, p.32

⁶ J.D. Browning (ed), Biography in the Eighteenth Century, Canada: McMaster University, 1980, p.29

⁷ Barbara Scardigli (ed), Essays on Plutarch's Lives, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p.5

⁸ Browning, p.42

⁹ Harold Nicolson, The Development of English Biography, London: Hogarth Press, 1928, p.37

revolutionary biographer. He invented the method of truthful portraiture and realistic biography, with the inclusion of vivid detail and psychological insight, here fusing the narrative with an explicit argument in defense of Savage.¹⁰ Boswell was arguably the first writer to appreciate the vital importance of providing a thoroughly documented historical context for his subject. His biography of Johnson is the best early example of the biographer as both archivist and artist.¹¹ He believed that individuality was the most important characteristic of a personality whom he shows in dramatic action. He was a constructivist, bringing together observations, conversations, anecdotes, together with letters and other sources, fused in a seamless narrative. This cumulative approach, which conveyed actuality, continuity and progression, was highly original and gave his biography vitality and interest. This subjective, deliberate, and extremely successful innovation in the art of biography, this combination of scholarly research with the artist's use of words, became the accepted style of biographical writing from the eighteenth century onwards.

During the nineteenth century, however, public opinion began to turn against the growing taste for truth and interest in the smallest details of the private lives of "great men". The concept of the "hero" was a common Victorian preoccupation and, for fifty years from 1830, a major factor in English culture. The Victorian concept of the "heroic" was a central element in the thinking of historical writer, biographer and moralist Thomas Carlyle, who in 1840 presented a series of lectures, "On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History", that were later transcribed into book form. Carlyle, whom Marwick claims, often seemed to regard "history" as synonymous with "biography", and who greatly exaggerated the importance of "great men"¹² took his chosen historical subjects and attempted to re-shape the public perception of them as models for imitation. In doing so he set himself against certain contemporary attitudes, such as the newly scientific perception of history as an impersonal play of forces that he felt had destroyed human individuality. Under Carlyle's influence, Kendall claims, "biography became neo-hagiography... a return to life-writing determined by the pressures of society rather than

¹⁰ David Schwalm, 'Johnson's *Life of Savage*: Biography as Argument', *Biography*, Spring 1985; 8(2): 136

¹¹ Alexander, p.91

¹² Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, London: Macmillan Press, 1989, p.54

by the pressures of talent, the exigencies of the medium, and the self-consciousness of the times”¹³.

Disillusionment with Victorian values came with the aftermath of World War I, leading to a period of anti-heroism and destruction of the public myth. In 1918 Lytton Strachey inaugurated the second great revolution in biographical approaches with his Eminent Victorians, which more than any other text signaled a break with the past. The emphasis in this collective biography was on brevity, objectivity (viewing his subjects from a critical distance) and psychological penetration, even if it showed them to be flawed individuals. This, in effect, brought them back into real human perspective¹⁴. Influenced by the new psychological theories of Freud,^{*} Strachey’s revolutionary method involved presenting only certain aspects of the factual evidence, which he examined from a psychological viewpoint, in order to reveal that the “great” are, like the rest of us, fallible; and he portrayed them with a combination of both sympathy and mockery. His purpose was to illustrate rather than to explain, in order to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth¹⁵. Alexander, however, finds it astonishing that Skidelsky calls Strachey “the father of modern biography”. Instead, he suggests, Strachey’s influence was almost entirely pernicious, and his writing very much more Victorian than modern: “he was a Victorian hagiographer inverted, as much a propagandist as the writers he was reacting against.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, it could be said that Strachey reflected the spirit of his age and popularised biography.

New Zealand

In New Zealand, the Victorian culture of the British colonizers had not only influenced the literature but also the picture New Zealanders were to form of themselves. Always the emphasis was on Britishness, with the implication of superiority over non-British people,

¹³ Paul Kendall, The Art of Biography, London: Allen & Unwin, 1965, p.106

¹⁴ John Gardiner, ‘Lost Victorians’, History Today, December 1999, p.18

^{*} Lytton’s brother, James Strachey and his wife Alix were the authorised translators of Freud.

¹⁵ Lytton Strachey, Preface to Eminent Victorians, London, Chatto and Windus, 1928, p.vii

¹⁶ Alexander, p.78; Skidelsky’s claim made in: Robert Skidelsky, ‘Only connect: biography and truth’, in The Troubled Face of Biography, Eric Homberg and John Charmley (eds.), London: Macmillan, 1988, p.4

and this enabled New Zealanders to identify themselves with the Carlylean sense of 'greatness'. Consequently, the subjects chosen for biographies, up until and during the 1940s, were, thematically, those who were considered to be 'great' men. In the early years of settlement, however, the local market was small and writers of biography had little to work on. Sources of information were limited in extent, of poor quality and of questionable accuracy. Most books were collections of biographical sketches. If one reviews the field chronologically, S.E. Grimstone's The Southern Settlements of New Zealand (1847), contains a small section of official and military biography; Brett's New Zealand Almanac (1879) contains extended biographies of some leading public men; Alfred Cox's Men of Mark in New Zealand (1886) adopts the dictionary arrangement, for which he collected biographical facts by means of personal consultation; T.W. Gudgeon's The Defenders of New Zealand (1887), contains biographical memoirs of colonists who distinguished themselves in the Maori wars; The Cyclopedia of New Zealand, in six volumes, published between 1897 and 1907 includes life stories of public figures, the great majority of which were based on information provided by the families or admirers; G.H. Scholefield's Who's Who in New Zealand, (1908, later editions in 1924 and 1932), again relied on main facts obtained from the person's themselves, although these were carefully checked against reliable sources. R.M. Burdon was the first writer to explore biographical possibilities in a consistent way in his New Zealand Notables series of 1941, 1945, and 1950. These were brief life stories, which included some character analysis, of a variety of well-known men. Some of the most notable individual biographies that were written, in Scholefield's view, were the biographies of: Henry Williams, by Hugh Carleton (1874-77); Edward Gibbon Wakefield, by Richard Garnett (1898); Sir George Grey, by G.C. Henderson (1907); Sir Francis Dillon Bell, by Hon. Downie Stewart (1927).¹⁷

From the second decade of the twentieth century the New Zealand Government began fostering scholarship and the arts, creating a cultural infrastructure heavily dependent on the state, which culminated in the huge publicity programme associated with the

¹⁷ G.H. Scholefield, A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, pp.v-viii

Centennial in 1940.¹⁸ Alongside this, during the 1930s, the intellectual climate of New Zealand began to change. McCormick suggested that it was the Depression that gave the original impetus to a new national consciousness; “it effected a reorientation in outlook of major importance to New Zealand’s literature... it can be said with certainty that a continuation of the comfortable pre-depression conditions could not have led to the New Zealand of 1940 with its signs, few but positive, of adult nationhood”.¹⁹ Those years between the early 1930s and the end of the Second World War in 1945 saw a new group of writers, making up a literary movement, carry out their role as self-nominated critics and demythologisers of their society. As Jones explains, a variety of factors came together to make a literary revolution: “a conservative literary establishment against which the young writers could revolt and thus define themselves as makers of an ‘anti-myth’ to oppose its ‘myth’, some older non-establishment writers they could claim as ancestors and allies, some available overseas models for new ways of writing, the Depression, and the accelerating international crisis”.²⁰ The Phoenix writers, as they came to be called collectively, aimed to sweep away the grey cloud and dusty air of Victorianism and Georgianism from New Zealand letters, as the English modernists had done in that country twenty years before.²¹ While there were still connections to the literature of origin, they sought to produce work with a New Zealand “voice” that might be relevant to ordinary New Zealanders. Men and the male culture was the common topic of the new writing which arose in the 1930s and strengthened during the Second World War. This became the background to an upsurge in biographical writing which coincided with a more egalitarian approach to the genre. After 1945, Phillips claims, the writing of biography became, “the most distinctive and distinguished contribution of New Zealand academic life”²².

¹⁸ Chris Hilliard, ‘Island Stories: The Writing of New Zealand History 1920-1940’, Auckland: University of Auckland, 1997 (Thesis: M.A.), p.8

¹⁹ E.R. McCormick, Letters and Art in New Zealand, Wellington: Department of Internal affairs, 1940, pp.169-170

²⁰ Lawrence Jones, Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture, 1932-1945, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003, p.21

²¹ Rachel Barrowman, Mason: The Life of R.A.K. Mason, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003, p.163

²² J.O.C. Phillips, Biography in New Zealand, Wellington: Allen & Unwin; Port Nicholson Press; Stout Research Institute, 1985, p.2

In 1940 New Zealand celebrated its Centennial, marking the hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. This milestone was the climax of the quickening of the cultural nationalism that had begun in the 1930s.²³ The Centennial surveys, a series of eleven history books commissioned by the state to mark the anniversary, was an attempt to explain New Zealand to the public. The subject of the series was overwhelmingly Pakeha New Zealand, the colonization of and sometimes the adaptation to the antipodes. The history of settlement became "New Zealand" history.²⁴ This latter point, Hilliard claims, is bound up with the myth that there was practically no New Zealand historiography until there were academic historians to write it. This, he says, is demonstrably false as Pakeha had been writing substantial works of history for many years before the Centennial. The Centennial was one point in a protracted and continuing process of formulating and reformulating "New Zealand" through historical writing.²⁵ And local histories of the period were organized round the central figure of the pioneer: hardworking, resourceful, energetic, a public servant to whom later generations owed obligations of memory.²⁶

Of most importance to future writers of biography, was the official publication of A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography by G. H. Scholefield,²⁷ a collection of 2,500 biographical essays, published in two volumes, by the Department of Internal Affairs. While the purpose of a biographical dictionary is to understand and realise the identity of a past society through the lives of some of its people, it is as much a reflection of the times in which it is compiled as of the times it describes. A newly-established nineteenth century state was likely to have launched a multivolume biographical dictionary so as to display historical credentials, to define geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries, and to instill a unified sense of pride. These impulses, McCalman suggests, did not cease

²³ Keith Sinclair, A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity, Wellington: Allen and Unwin; Port Nicholson Press, 1986

²⁴ Hilliard, 'Island Stories', p.128

²⁵ Chris Hilliard, 'Stories of Becoming: the Centennial Surveys and the Colonisation of New Zealand', New Zealand Journal of History, 1999, 33(1): 4

²⁶ Hilliard, 'Island Stories', p.147

²⁷ G.H. Scholefield, A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940

in the twentieth century.²⁸ Scholefield had collected a vast amount of material over thirty years for what was intended to be a “private venture”, until the proposed dictionary was chosen by the National Historical Committee to be one of the Centennial Publications. From the time he had first considered publishing a national biography in 1907, however, he found that literature on the biographical aspect of New Zealand history was deficient. This contributes to the dictionary’s shortcomings and limitations. Particularly obvious is the contrast between the comprehensive treatment that it was possible to give many subjects and the scrappy information that was available about others²⁹.

Chronologically, Scholefield takes 1840 as his starting point, when organised European settlement began in New Zealand. He sought to compile his dictionary from documented sources, with constant revision and checks for accuracy. But it soon became evident that available published biographical material was quite inadequate. He was disappointed to find that few families had preserved records or knew anything of the achievements of pioneer parents and grandparents. So, between 1929 and 1934, he published a series of articles in the press outlining some of the more prominent figures in the history of the provinces, hoping that these would lead to verification or correction of errors before the publication of the dictionary. This series, in Scholefield’s opinion, constituted the most important contribution to New Zealand biography so far published, and much new information came to light³⁰. His basis of selection of subjects for inclusion in the dictionary was neither lineage nor birth nor wealth, which settled the claims of many to a place in the English Dictionary of National Biography on which his dictionary was modeled. The New Zealand dictionary had to be considered from a much shorter historical perspective. Any attempt at establishing an orthodox hierarchy of merit “out of an ultra-democratic community such as ours in New Zealand... was premature”³¹. Lineage alone gave no prescriptive right to inclusion, and neither birth, nor wealth in itself, was a valid qualification. Significance in our national history, from whatever

²⁸ Iain McCalman, National Biographies and National Identity, Iain McCalman, et al. (eds.), Canberra: The Australian National University, 1996, p.i

²⁹ G.F. James, ‘Review’ [A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography], in Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand, April 1941, 1(3): 199

³⁰ Scholefield, p.ix

³¹ Scholefield, p.x, quoting Dr. Daniel Pollen, New Zealand Herald, 11 May 1889

standpoint, was Scholefield's sole consideration³². And he defined "significance" as public impact. In accordance with that criterion, still seen in terms of British "greatness", the subjects selected were mostly male and European, and the majority politicians, from the nation's leaders to minor figures such as provincial councillors. "Commoners", who from different perspectives might be thought significant by virtue of their typicality, found no place in Scholefield's scheme.³³ Some Maori leaders, missionaries, soldiers, public servants, educationalists, writers, artists, prominent women, and mayors of "any of the chief cities", were also included to give, according to Scholefield, a more representative picture of nineteenth century New Zealand life.

It was another fifty years before another national dictionary of biography began to be compiled. In 1990 the first volume of The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography was published, a sesquicentennial project under the editorship of W.H. Oliver.³⁴ This dictionary was a hugely expanded work in five volumes, much wider in its range of human subjects and human experiences than Scholefield's work. Nearly thirty per cent of those included were Maori, twenty per cent were women, and a considerable number were people whom Scholefield would not have considered "significant" enough. As Oliver explained, these proportions took their origin from a decision to modify the conventions by which individuals, traditionally, were given a place in national dictionaries "by directing questions to the condition (and the significance) of the powerless as well as the powerful, the victims as well as the victors, the poor as well as the rich, the obscure as well as the eminent."³⁵ His goal was that, as a reference work, it should give an insight into the scope of New Zealand society rather than just a list of the elite, to get beyond the "hierarchy of merit" to something more egalitarian and representative, to democratise history by spreading the net to include people whose influence was regional, tribal or social³⁶.

³² Scholefield, p.xi

³³ Hilliard, 'Island Stories', p.67

³⁴ W.H. Oliver, (ed.), The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol.1, Wellington: Allen & Unwin; Department of Internal Affairs, 1990

³⁵ Oliver, Dictionary, p. ix-x

³⁶ Marion McLeod, 'History From the Bottom Up' [Review of The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol.1], Listener, 18 June 1990, p.15

During the decade between the publication of volume I in 1990, and volume V in 2000, which in total encompasses entries about 3049 subjects written by over 1200 authors, there had been considerable growth in historical research in New Zealand. This contributed to a level of accuracy and scholarship not previously possible. By the end of the decade, gaps identified in 1990 were narrowed, particularly in Maori history and women's history. This fuller investigation altered the nature of the wider history. It was for this reason that Oliver put into place a broad programme for selection (and research) in the Dictionary.

In preparation, Oliver had read a good deal about the history of collective biographies, noting especially the evolution of national from universal (that is, European) biographical compilations. He had come to the obvious, and, for his purposes, useful, conclusion that the conventional link between nationality and collective biography was a recent development, in many instances designed to legitimize the emergent nation states of the nineteenth century and the new nationalisms of the twentieth century. This kind of national biography tended to concentrate upon those people in whose lives the fledgling nations could discover and celebrate an alleged essential character. In general, the people who had, it was believed, "made" and "shaped" the nation dominated the selections. Little or nothing was heard of those who did not so obviously contribute to that historical identity – indigenous peoples, women, ethnic minorities, eccentrics and characters, or ordinary people who simply "stood for" whole areas of social experience.³⁷

Walter notes, however, that while collective biography is closely linked to history as an intellectual enterprise, it has only a limited claim to representing a shared consciousness.³⁸ While in general it tends to focus on elites, and the principle of selection by achievement is understood, how, he asks, is "everyman/woman" chosen?³⁹ Although there are "lesser" figures leavening the "elite" in such late twentieth century biographical dictionaries as The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, they are usually included

³⁷ W.H. Oliver, Looking for the Phoenix: a memoir, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2002, p.142

³⁸ James Walter, 'Seven Questions about National Biography', National Biographies and National Identity, Iain McCalman, et al. (eds.), p.30

³⁹ Walter, 'Seven Questions', p.31

because they are *out* of the ordinary (sporting stars, colourful personalities, victims, murderers) rather than because they speak for the common life. The result, Walter claims, is that despite intriguing glimpses of representative individuals and those outside the mainstream, we get a fragmented, partial and unfocused sort of social history from biographical dictionaries.⁴⁰

Alexander argues, on the other hand, that during the last years of the twentieth century, as non-elitist biography became of great and growing interest to a wide readership, there was increasing recognition that biography had the capacity to portray the human face, our face, in a way that no form other than the novel could do. The biography, in other words, becomes increasingly universal, a paradox given its precise peculiarity. It becomes what Donald Home has dubbed “sociography”, speaking of entire societies through individuals, since only in terms of social contexts are individuals, like biographies, comprehensible.⁴¹ It accordingly becomes a central element in the politics of representation, which on a large scale becomes national politics; the truth about the self and its relation to the social world is the ever-moving point on which biography focuses.⁴² Holmes believes that rapid character sketches (what Strachey called “portraits in miniature”) such as those in biographical dictionaries, and, as we shall see later, those that are typical of women’s collective biography are fundamental to the art of biography. “The ability to give a snapshot impression of a whole life caught from one fleeting but revealing angle, is the very opposite (or complementary) discipline to the huge, factually accumulated chronicle; and really great biography (that rare thing) invariably contains both.” And he adds that often those pieces were inspired by that sound – but much mocked – journalistic standby, the centenary article. Holmes had learned “to honour this convention, because it is the opportunity for some lost or undervalued fragment of human history to be recovered... and that this is a vital part of the biographer’s special contract with the past”.⁴³

⁴⁰ Walter, ‘Seven Questions’, p. 32

⁴¹ The phrase, quoted by Alexander, p.92, is from Home’s autobiography The Education of Young Donald, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967

⁴² Alexander, p.92

⁴³ Richard Holmes, Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer, London: Flamingo, 1995, p.136

These two New Zealand biographical dictionaries, with their different emphases, different range of subjects, and differences in the quality and quantity of source material, reflect the changes in biographical writing in New Zealand between the two centenaries of the 1940s and the 1990s. During those fifty years there was an upsurge in the writing of individual biographies as the form became increasingly important and extraordinarily popular. There has, however, been little critical writing on biography. J.O.C. Phillips edited a collection of essays on the subject that were first delivered as papers in July 1984 at the inaugural conference of the Stout Research Centre for the Study of New Zealand Society, History and Culture.⁴⁴ Biography was chosen as the theme because the centre was conceived as a deliberately interdisciplinary institution and biography was a topic of interest to people in both the humanities and the social sciences. It was also a well timed theme as W.H. Oliver, and his staff, were just beginning their mammoth task of compiling The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, as a sesquicentennial project. The conference was jointly hosted by the Dictionary and was designed in part to help those involved in the project clarify their purposes and sharpen their methods. Finally, according to Phillips, it seemed appropriate to initiate a new institution committed to the serious investigation of New Zealand by focusing upon the "simplest and primary task, the study of the individual."⁴⁵ It is apparent, however, that Phillips, in this slight collection of essays, undervalues biography, and this may be one of the factors contributing to the lateness of the development of the form in New Zealand. As well as this small book, The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English, in the chapter "Non-fiction" by Peter Gibbons, also includes what is no more than an overview of the history of biographical writing in New Zealand, outlining its development within New Zealand literature as a whole.⁴⁶

This thesis attempts to remedy this lack of critique of biographical writing in New Zealand by exploring the changes that have occurred over the fifty years between 1940 and 1990. The biographies that have been selected as case studies in order to illustrate

⁴⁴ J.O.C. Phillips (ed.), Biography in New Zealand, Wellington: Allen and Unwin/Port Nicholson Press/Stout Research Centre, 1985, 105p.

⁴⁵ Phillips, (ed.), Biography in New Zealand, p.1

⁴⁶ Peter Gibbons, 'Non-Fiction', The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English, Terry Sturm (ed.), Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998

those changes have been divided into three major themes: 'Great Men', 'Women Too', and 'Significant Others'. Within each category one biography from the 1940s and two from the 1990s are considered in a series of individual discursive essays.

Great Men

The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast: Explorer, Geologist, Museum Builder, H.F.

von Haast, Wellington: The Author, 1948

To Be a Hero: Sir George Grey, 1812-1897, Edmund Bohan, Auckland: Harper Collins, 1998

Bernard Freyberg, V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations, Paul Freyberg, London; Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991

Women Too

The Women of New Zealand, Helen M Simpson, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940

The Story of Suzanne Aubert, Jessie Munro, Auckland: Auckland University Press; Bridget Williams Books, 1996

Wrestling With the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame, Michael King, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2000

Significant Others

William Colenso: printer, missionary, botanist, explorer, politician: His Life and Journeys, A.G. Bagnall and G.C. Petersen, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1948

Nearly Out of Heart and Hope: the puzzle of a colonial labourer's diary, Miles Fairburn, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995

Edmund Hillary: The Life of a Legend, Pat Booth, Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1993

This selection of biographies represents a cross-section of subjects and approaches by their authors. Each chapter introduces the theme, and then in most cases looks closely at the biography within a template that includes: historical background, subject, author, text and criticism. (The Women of New Zealand is an exception here as it only loosely fits the

template). The final chapter then evaluates the biographies within certain biographical principles, where applicable, that include: the choice and treatment of subject, the relationship between the subject and the biographer, ethical concerns, the availability of sources and the variety of forms. In conclusion, the changes illustrated by the case studies will be reviewed, together with the contribution by their authors to those changes, tracing the differences in thematic emphases, content, methodology and form between the two decades.

CHAPTER TWO

GREAT MEN

Central to our cultural thinking is the idea of the “great man” or “hero”. Hence the Great Man Theory of history for a long time dominated chronologies and analyses of the past. Biographers, too, from Plutarch to those of the present day, have been interested in “great men” and their actions. The meaning of “greatness”, however, is difficult to define. To assert that a man or woman is “great” is to make an appraisal of merit or quality. Such a judgment is subjective, guided by the aims and the preferences of the writer, and over the twentieth century, biography has experienced a major shift in its values. Nineteenth century Britain had been an age of hero-worship when the assumed qualities of the heroic individual were presented in idealized portraits. The early years of the twentieth century became a period of anti-heroism, when some writers aimed at destruction of the public myth. Biography in more recent times returned to the notion of the “hero”, but also moved towards a concerted striving for “truthfulness” in order to portray the whole sense of the person, while at the same time acknowledging that “truth” itself is always changing.

Thomas Carlyle, writing On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History in 1840, believed that it was important that men should still have the capacity and scope for greatness and that society should recognise this need and salute great men⁴⁷. The scheme of On Heroes is broadly suggestive and representative of heroic types and societies. This implies an evolutionary process in the history of ideas and beliefs, which is deflected from time to time by historical counter currents. As society advances and becomes more sophisticated, Carlyle believed, it makes certain forms of hero obsolete. Thus the heroic form contracts with time and evolving social conditions making it increasingly difficult

⁴⁷ Jenny Calder, Heroes from Byron to Guevara, London: Hamilton, 1977, p.1

for the heroic spirit to manifest itself⁴⁸. Yet the concept remained an unfailing fact of human experience and a basis of social organisation, the guarantee of social survival, even in an age of social disruption, revolutions and false ideologies.

The main topic raised by contemporary reviewers of On Heroes was Carlyle's "great man" view of history. Criticism tended to concentrate on his two statements: the "History of the World is but the Biography of Great Men", and Universal History "is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here". The "image of the hero" that Carlyle created was "a strong man who stands alone... a leader possessed by vision, who shall be listened to, revered, obeyed".⁴⁹ And he insisted on the necessity of a great biography having a great subject, maintaining that it was the only medium for the revelation of a subject's greatest work. Courage was the fundamental measure of human character, and the subject could be measured only by how he used it in relation to society⁵⁰. As Reed points out, not only did the biographer have to judge accurately the power of the environment and the force of the subject's will, but he also had to write about them in such a way that a balance was achieved between internal will and external force⁵¹. The necessary reflector of the biographer, then, was a vital third element. If the hero's deeds were to be portrayed faithfully, they must be reflected by a contemporary mirror of reality not only capable of receiving the whole image of the subject, but also able to transmit directly in words the vividness, characteristics, and force of presence of that subject⁵². Since the history that Carlyle envisioned was for the most part biographic, it followed that an important function of biography was historical. The responsibility for this he placed squarely upon the biographer's shoulders. In Reed's view, this responsibility, which seems a truism now, was a significant critical act⁵³.

⁴⁸ Michael K. Goldberg, Introduction to Thomas Carlyle's On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, Berkley: University of California Press, c.1993, p.lvii

⁴⁹ Goldberg, p.lxix

⁵⁰ Joseph W. Reed, Jr., English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century, 1801-1838, Yale University Press, 1966, p.62

⁵¹ Reed, pp.73-74

⁵² Reed, p.78

⁵³ Reed, p.79

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Britain's Empire was the perfect territory for traditional heroism, by those explorers, missionaries, and soldiers, whose heroism was not only Christian and patriotic, but contributed so essentially to the power and progress of the nation. This imperialist vision involved implanting the character of England on colonised lands. It followed, then, that in New Zealand explorers became the first conventional heroes. Often avid seekers after glory, they were conscious heirs to a tradition of heroism that gave precedence to masculine virtues and male pursuits. This was the standard form of history in new nations: tales of heroes and narratives of great events were the building blocks from which the myth of national progress or destiny was constructed. But this type of history, as Davison points out, being centrally concerned with political lessons of the past, was "always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction".⁵⁴ It was prone to false analogies, selected its explanations in accordance with preconceived ideas, and traced causal continuities where none existed. In celebrating the achievements of history's winners, it marginalized the losers and diffused the pressure for change⁵⁵.

As well as explorers, for more than a century New Zealanders worshipped military heroism, without being able to prove themselves in battle. When the opportunity came, in World War I, it was in circumstances that all but destroyed assumptions on which the ideals were founded, the shock so great partly because of the absorption of those images of heroic glory. Part of the response was, according to Davison, skepticism towards great men, and a need to explore landscapes in which there were no heroes⁵⁶. At the same time the heroic idea, as inspiration, as challenge, lost currency. Carlyle had seen the hero as called by destiny; the modern historian is more likely to see the hero as constructed by society. One saw his task as celebration; the other sees it as critique⁵⁷.

Calder suggests that the idea of the male hero is elitist, anti-democratic, and counters the belief in equality. She maintains that there is a need to be able to control our response to

⁵⁴ Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000, p.17

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Davison, p.24

⁵⁷ Davison, p.29

him. As an individual who contains the best of the mass, he must never be allowed to act against the collective interest⁵⁸. And she questions whether the democratic view of the hero, the belief that anyone can be heroic in fact implies a lack of independence. The whole idea of the democratic hero is counter to the willingness to be led. The tamer of the frontier may represent progress, and is therefore a laudable symbol of national achievement, but we really enjoy him for his wildness, his refusal to submit to convention. This defiance is something that has pre-occupied the twentieth century hero, tempted him to be anti-heroic, to rebel, to refuse to conform, to challenge. While the nineteenth century hero tended to be a hero of conformity, the representative of an ideal that expressed the best in society, the twentieth century hero can be generalised as the hero of non-conformity⁵⁹.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw a renewed attack on the Great Man theory of history. As Skidelsky put it:

Most historians now reject the Great Man theory of history – the view that historical events are caused by, or bear the imprint of, or would have been very different but for, the unique personalities of leading actors. The most common view is that the hour produces the man – not the other way round... Authorial idiosyncrasy may be a quite minor factor in the genesis of a literary or historical event, or in the shape it takes. To treat it as a major, or the major, factor is to distort our understanding of the event or to trivialise the achievement; to rob it of its public and universal attributes.⁶⁰

As Alexander points out, Skidelsky is clearly on strong ground in identifying an attack on the Great Man theory of history as challenging and problematising biography, when it concentrates on outstanding men and women.⁶¹

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the resistance to hero-worship seemed to weaken. It was recognised that the old egalitarianism, now regularly denounced as a manifestation of the “tall-poppy syndrome”, the desire to cut down high achievers, was

⁵⁸ Calder, xii

⁵⁹ Calder, p.98

⁶⁰ Robert Skidelsky, ‘Only Connect: Biography and Truth’, in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, E. Homberger and J. Charmley (eds), New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988, p.2

⁶¹ Alexander, p.76

not acceptable⁶². And the desire for new heroes grew stronger in the post-modern, multi-cultural society. But it was difficult to appropriate the essential qualities of the old heroes under new conditions⁶³. The twentieth century had become more aware of human fallibility, was cynical about idealism and good faith, and preferred not to risk optimism and commitment⁶⁴. In biographical writing, the drive to present “tell-all” portraits of subjects meant that “great men” were being revealed as “ordinary”. Yet what makes a good or brave or clever person a hero is not the absence of weakness or wrongdoing. Nor is courage or moral force sufficient in itself to make a hero. What counts, Calder believes, is the hero’s capacity to present a personal resolution of values and interests that may be felt to be a contradiction.⁶⁵ Then the very complexity of his character and the diversity of achievements afford multiple and divergent bases for loyalty and identification⁶⁶.

Nevertheless, no good biography is or could be merely the history of one great man or woman. It is, by example, the history of the entire society and period in which that man or woman lived. Only to the extent that the biographer contextualizes the subject can that subject be made comprehensible to the reader. The more intricately the biographer involves the subject with the network of signification which alone gives the subject his or her meaning, the more successful the biography is likely to be judged. In other words, the very basis of the post-structural case that texts operate as closed systems becomes a powerful argument for biography as a form.⁶⁷

The “great men” or “heroes” that I have chosen to examine here have all influenced the collective cultural imagination. The images – of Haast, the explorer; Grey, the politician; Freyberg, the soldier - have been thoroughly absorbed and remain part of our understanding of the past and present as examples of historical and cultural need. Each biography has been influenced by the perspective and intent of its biographer, and the time in which that author lived. By examining them as a series of case studies,

⁶² Davison, p.25

⁶³ Davison, p.34-35

⁶⁴ Calder, p.x

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Davison, pp.31-32

⁶⁷ Alexander, p.91

differences can be identified in the writing of New Zealand biography between the 1940s and the 1990s.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JULIUS VON HAAST: Explorer, Geologist, Museum
Builder, H.F. von Haast, Wellington: The Author, 1948

Biographies of statesmen, churchmen, and pioneers began to be included in New Zealand historiography early in the twentieth century. The biography of Sir Julius von Haast, 1822-1887, written by his son Heinrich during the 1940s, was the first to have been written about a scientist. At the time, the emergence of new professions had attracted a number of biographical works that attempted, among other things, to gain recognition and respect for those professions. This biography commemorates a life devoted to scientific research and education, and the contribution Haast made to the forces building a new community during the late nineteenth century.

Born in 1822 in Bonn, Germany, Johann Franz Julius Haast studied Geology and Mineralogy there, and gained a sufficiently comprehensive knowledge of those two subjects to allow him to carry out his geological surveys in New Zealand that brought him international fame. He arrived in Auckland in 1858, aged thirty-six, and during the thirty years that he spent in New Zealand, he was able to apply his considerable energy, his versatility, and his knowledge to the diverse needs of that pioneering period. One of Haast's early positions was that of Provincial Geologist for Canterbury, the first permanent employment of a scientific man in New Zealand. The appointment had as its objective the discovery and development of resources in that province. His account of the work he accomplished was published in 1879 under the title The Geology of Canterbury and Westland. At the same time, Haast collected hundreds of specimens of flora and fauna, a significant number new to the scientific world, reporting his discoveries in the leading European journals. In 1884 he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographic Society, conferred only on explorers of the first rank, and the first for work in New Zealand.

Under the terms of his agreement as Provincial Geologist, Haast was able to establish the Canterbury Museum, which opened in October 1870, becoming its first official Curator. As a scientist he had, from the beginning, envisaged the Museum as an educational

institution centred upon the collections he had made during his surveys. At the end of 1866, Haast had retrieved a large collection of moa bones from the Glenmark swamp, near Waipara in North Canterbury. The swamp supplied him with a great quantity of material for exchange with museums overseas, thus enhancing not only his own reputation abroad, but that of the Canterbury Museum as well. Exchanges to the Museum came in so rapidly that additions to the building were required by 1872. Further extensions to the building were urgently required for the treasures that Haast had brought back from Europe in 1887, but this had still not been done at the time Heinrich was writing his father's biography some fifty years later. After his death the museum had floundered without his driving force and power of appeal to the public. A plan was put forward for the reorganisation and rebuilding or extension of the museum as the Canterbury Memorial for the New Zealand Centennial in 1940, but it did not eventuate. As Heinrich states: "While the citizens of Christchurch see their children being taught Natural Science, for which Haast fought so strenuously, by means of the collections that he amassed with such enthusiasm and energy, they dishonour his Memory by allowing his Monument, the Canterbury Museum, to moulder away. *The tragedy of it*".⁶⁸ The biography of his father was written as a response.

Science, Julius Haast maintained, had material benefits to offer an undeveloped country, and it was on this aspect that he laid emphasis when, in 1862, he formed the Canterbury branch of the Philosophical Institute, with himself as President. With the backing and approval of the Institute, Haast suggested that a school of science be founded as an adjunct to the museum. An association known as the Canterbury Collegiate Union was formed and afterwards, in 1872, affiliated with the University of New Zealand as Canterbury College. Haast was among the lecturers appointed. He became Professor of Geology in 1876, and served as a member of the Senate of the University of New Zealand from 1879-87. As an intermediary between the Old and New Worlds, Haast possessed certain unique advantages, but, in Heinrich's view, it was to the Old World that he had to look for the unstinting recognition of his genius that was begrudged him in the

⁶⁸ H.F. von Haast, The Life and Times of Julius von Haast, p.974

New by the materialists and the envious.⁶⁹ At the end of 1864, when Haast looked back at the work he had accomplished so far, the verdict of the great European scientific men upon it, and the value of it to the Province, he was to find his achievements challenged by many in the Provincial Council and the value of his services derided.⁷⁰ Among his biographers, only his son seems to have noted the bitterness and disappointment that this engendered.

Eventually a succession of awards did come Haast's way. In 1885, he was chosen to represent New Zealand at the Indian and Colonial Exhibition, to be held in London the following year, where the Canterbury Museum was to be considered by the London Times (May 31, 1886) to be 'one of the best organised and most complete national museums in the world.' Ten years earlier his services to science had been rewarded with a patent of hereditary nobility conferred upon him by the Austrian Emperor. From then on he was known as von Haast. Finally his adopted country awarded him a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George, in 1885, and during his visit to London, a Knighthood was conferred on him by Queen Victoria. He visited Cambridge to accept the honorary degree of Doctor of Science, and the French Government made him an *Officier de l'Instruction Publique*. While still in Europe he set out on a tour of its greatest museums and obtained many additions to the Christchurch collection. He returned to Christchurch in the winter of 1887, full of plans for the expansion of his Museum. But a month later, he died suddenly, at the height of his fame.

Four biographical sketches of Sir Julius von Haast had been written before Heinrich's biography. Studies of his life were included in collections by Alfred Cox, James Cowan, S.H. Jenkinson and R.M. Burdon.⁷¹ The purpose of each was to honour those men who had made a contribution to the successful colonisation of New Zealand. Cox's aim was to place on record the names of men who had made their mark as colonists to whom, he

⁶⁹ Haast, p.970

⁷⁰ Haast, p.349

⁷¹ Alfred Cox, Men of Mark in New Zealand, Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1886; James Cowan, 'Famous New Zealanders' (series), The New Zealand Railways Magazine, 1935; S.H. Jenkinson, New Zealanders and Science, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940; R.M. Burdon, New Zealand Notables, Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1945

believed, people and posterity owed a debt of gratitude and an obligation to preserve their names. Cowan had summarized Haast's career in his magazine series, while Jenkinson acknowledged Haast's contribution to science in his book that was commissioned as one of the Centennial Surveys. Each of these writers relates, in simple narrative form, the life of Haast and records his achievements. R.M. Burdon was the first writer to go further and explore biographical possibilities. His essays, (three series: 1941, 1945, 1950), one of which one is about Haast, deal with "a variety of eccentric, flawed and tragic characters", and include a little psychological probing.⁷²

None of these authors, however, had access to the extensive source material available to Heinrich von Haast, nor were they writing from the special position that he was, as the son of the subject and fellow academic, who brought to the biography of his father "intimate family knowledge, sympathetic but frank understanding, and the critical candour of a legal mind."⁷³ In the Preface, Heinrich explains that shortly after his father's death he had suggested to his mother that she should write her husband's biography, but she had declined. Some fifty years later, as New Zealand's centenary approached, Heinrich himself was urged to commemorate his father's services to this country by writing the biography himself. As Cowan stated at the time, "Among the memoirs of great New Zealanders that were overdue was the useful life of such a man as Sir Julius von Haast with his so greatly varied career. There is, I think, only one man who could write it satisfactorily, and that is his son, Mr. H.F. von Haast."⁷⁴ Heinrich, feeling that he at least had information that no other historian could possess, and encouraged by Cowan's expression of confidence, together with the sympathy and affection for his subject that would sustain him in the long and fatiguing task of research, began the labour of collecting the necessary material, fearing that he could evoke from the past only a shadowy figure.⁷⁵

⁷² Peter Gibbons, 'Non-Fiction', *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Terry Sturm (ed.), Oxford University Press, New Zealand, 1998, p.83

⁷³ Gilbert Archey, Foreword to Heinrich Haast, *The Life and Times of Julius von Haast*, p.vii

⁷⁴ James Cowan, 'Famous New Zealanders: Julius von Haast', *The New Zealand Railways Magazine*, 2 September, 1935,

⁷⁵ Haast, p.xi

The work in progress revealed certain advantages. As he explains:

Haast's work as a scientist and the gradual development of his views were recorded in his numerous reports and writings, in his Geology of Canterbury and Westland, and in his maps... the Christchurch papers contained a full record of his doings, not only as Provincial Geologist, but as a public man, [including] many 'leaders' upon him by editors... and [there were] many full and picturesque descriptions of the Museum and its contents at various stages of its development, for which I pay tribute to the observant, sympathetic and graphic reporters of those early days.⁷⁶

With painstaking and careful research, Heinrich made extensive use of these sources, hoping that they would make up for his shortcomings as a biographer and as an historian.

There were, however, limitations:

...nearly all Haast's colleagues and friends had disappeared... nor were there letters of Haast extant... there were some thousands of letters from other scientists to be perused, but practically none of Haast's letters to them... moreover, except in his account of the Nelson and Haast Pass journeys, his descriptions are very impersonal, and it is only a chance remark here and there that has been preserved that gives the reader some idea of the atmosphere of his party and his influence on his companions.⁷⁷

In his talk entitled "Biography in New Zealand" to the PEN society, in 1951, Alan Mulgan, a pre-eminent literary critic at the time, noted that New Zealand was "growing bigger and therefore less susceptible to the fear of consequences if we tell the truth about our subjects", while, at the same time, it was "like a small town or village, where what is said is quickly spread around and people talk and look askance".⁷⁸ Mulgan takes Heinrich's Life of his father as an example of candid writing within the family, drawing attention particularly to his treatment of his father's character:

He does not conceal the fact that Julius, though loveable, had certain traits that made him rather unpopular in some quarters. In particular he describes, with nice humour, the way in which Julius angled in Vienna for the honour of ennoblement. He caught the fish. Here is one of the difficulties of biography. Members of a family and friends know the subject best, but they find it hard to be impartial.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Haast, p.xii

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Alan Mulgan, 'Biography in New Zealand', talk at P.E.N. Wellington Centre, 1951; typescript of part of talk glued onto first page of Heinrich's own copy of the biography; The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

⁷⁹ Mulgan, 'Biography in New Zealand'.

Heinrich describes his father as “impetuous and inflammable, ambitious, emotional, romantic, flamboyant, and with a capacity for work unlimited,”⁸⁰ yet rarely reveals his personal feelings towards him despite having fond memories of his childhood. He points out that his own recollections of his father and his associates relate only to the last years of their lives, so that for the earlier years he was in much the same position as a biographer with only the printed and written records before him. He has, however, attempted to:

Portray him in his habit as he lived, with his outstanding qualities and defects, the natural sympathy and respect of a son being increased by that of a researcher who realizes step by step the constant opposition that Haast encountered and the courage with which he faced and conquered it.⁸¹

From it, he hoped, would emerge something like the true figure of a great pioneer.

Heinrich Haast looked back to the Victorian concerns of investing the country with adventure and romance, their fascination with detail and the themes of hard work, manliness, and success. At the same time, he let his father tell his own story, condensing accounts of his explorations, and his reports, his scientific theories, and other publications, leaving his own language and idiom unchanged. From the vast amount of material, he sifted out the salient features necessary to enable the reader to realise the gigantic nature of Haast’s task in building up, practically single-handed, the Canterbury Museum. In contrast to previous authors, however, Heinrich’s emphasis is on the lack of recognition and appreciation that was accorded his father during his lifetime, noting the difficulties with which he had to contend, and the disappointment he feels that his father’s achievements have, by the 1940s, seemingly been forgotten. Obviously he felt a need to compensate his father with what he felt was his due, and he describes the undertaking as a “labour of love” that he regarded as both a duty and an honour to perform.⁸²

⁸⁰ Haast, p.9

⁸¹ Haast, p.xiii

⁸² Haast, Dedication (on fly-leaf) to the memory of his mother and his wife, each Mary von Haast

In November 1948, the University of New Zealand conferred on Heinrich Frederick von Haast, at the age of eighty-four, the degree of Doctor of Literature. His thesis was this monumental work, The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast, the compilation of which had occupied him ten years. The book, at nearly 1200 pages, including illustrations and maps, is still one of the largest published in New Zealand. Mulgan noted the problem presented to the author by the vastness of his material:

Should he write a moderate-sized book and summarize the extraordinary scientific zeal and achievements so that they would appeal to the layman. If he did this, the book would be much cheaper and the popular appeal greater. On the other hand, that solution would leave much of the documentary evidence of Sir Julius' scientific work still out of convenient reach of the scientist. Dr. von Haast decided to make a very big book of it and to risk the criticism that the result was unwieldy and non-selective. I feel he was right.⁸³

This suggests that Mulgan valued biography mainly as historical record. Its late development in this country, he claims, had been due to lack of interest. "People did not read New Zealand books... New Zealanders did not think their history interesting... you can't have writing without people to buy the books."⁸⁴ It was the growth in national consciousness, stimulated by the Centennial in 1940 and World War II that encouraged the writing of biographies of historical figures.⁸⁵ Heinrich's view of the proper role of biography was a means by which "great men", such as his father, might be honoured and their deeds recorded in the history of their country. At a luncheon held by the Movement to honour Heinrich on receiving his Doctorate, and at which he was elected an honorary life member, the Vice-president, J.S. Barton, claimed that "father and son would go down to history hand in hand", an assertion that was received with acclamation.⁸⁶

Writer, photographer and mountaineer, John Pascoe, however, was critical of the work. In his contemporary review, he states that Heinrich

spreads his praises too thick; he lifts claims too high; he can weary or irritate by doing so. But he cannot turn wearied or irritated readers away from the abiding interest of his father's career and personality, nor induce them to forget the credit

⁸³ Mulgan, 'Biography in New Zealand'.

⁸⁴ Mulgan, 'The Writing of New Zealand History and Biography', Second Lecture to W.E.A., June 1950, MS Paper 224-19; The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

⁸⁵ Hilliard, 'Stories of Becoming', p.4

⁸⁶ J.S. Barton, 'A Fine Achievement', British-American Co-operator, January 1949, p.3.

due to the son's pious and immense diligence... [Yet he] tends too steadily to write as his father's advocate, filially attached to his cause; a measure of judicial detachment was wanted and would have been worth the struggle.⁸⁷

In a hand-written note in the margin of his own copy of the book, Heinrich criticises the review, claiming that "Pascoe's only qualification was some climbing and exploration in the Rakaia region. He knows nothing of history or science." He maintained that the Editor of The Press cared not for the memory of Haast, nor any appreciation of his work, and in printing Pascoe's review "had its revenge for the author's [critical] reference to it on p.826 of his book."

At the Graduation ceremony at Canterbury College soon after Haast's death, Professor John Macmillan Brown, later Chancellor of Canterbury University, in a tribute to Haast, urged his students to act with "enthusiasm", which was their greatest asset, pointing out that "a finer instance of its perennial power could not be found than in the career of Sir Julius von Haast."⁸⁸ To the three traditional virtues that Haast espoused - service, truth, and vision - must be added enthusiasm, the Romantic rediscovery of which was one factor behind Victorian hero-worship. In the context of those times Haast was both a hero and a great man. He felt that he should have been honoured as such in his lifetime, and so did his son. Along with other scientists, however, he frequently had to surmount indifference, sometimes even to combat hostility and to reprove misguided eagerness for immediate material benefits. Heinrich's emphasis, then, was on the obstacles that his father had to overcome, and it was this struggle, he maintained, that made him a great man. Yet, as Mulgan proclaims, this biography "is more than a 'life' of a very remarkable man; it is a valuable document of scientific history, and has a strong human interest bearing on the history of Christchurch and Canterbury. Heinrich von Haast thoroughly well deserved the degree of Doctor of Literature conferred on him by his University."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ John Pascoe, 'Explorer, Geologist, Museum Builder', [Review of The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast], The Press, October 2, 1948, p.3

⁸⁸ Haast, p.970

⁸⁹ Alan Mulgan, 'Two New Zealanders: Sir Julius and H.F. von Haast', MS Papers 0224-18; Wellington, The Alexander Turnbull Library

Heinrich's biography was intended to honour his father's "greatness", in the Carlylean sense, and to record his extraordinary life for posterity. In the process it moves away from the traditional habit of dealing only with exemplary lives towards openness about the subject's eccentricities as well. Contextually, it looks back to Victorian methodology and love of detail, but also charts the progress of exploration and the rise of science in New Zealand. Despite its limitations, it demonstrates the beginnings of a change in biographical writing in New Zealand.

TO BE A HERO: A BIOGRAPHY OF SIR GEORGE GREY, Edmund Bohan,
Auckland: Harper Collins, 1998

One figure who belonged to Britain's imperial age and was prominent in colonial New Zealand was Sir George Grey, 1812-1897. Grey consciously embodied the Victorian ideal of the Hero. Carlyle had influenced his early life and education, his doctrine of the "great man" in particular, and Grey, of whom his family and society expected much, had been led to believe that he was capable of being a true hero. Gradually, during his lengthy career, he was recognised, in a century that sought and honoured famous men, as one of Carlyle's "leaders of men."⁹⁰ Grey's was an exceptional life, lived among momentous events, and that life has been the subject of five biographies. The most recent, To Be a Hero: A Biography of Sir George Grey, 1998, by Edmund Bohan, will be considered here in depth.

George Grey is believed to have been born in 1812 in Lisbon, Portugal, eight days after his father had been killed during an attack by the Duke of Wellington's army on Napoleon's soldiers in the fortress of Badajoz, Spain. He was educated in England at a boarding school at Guilford, from which he ran away, after which he was privately tutored until he entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in 1826. In 1830 he was commissioned ensign in the 83rd Foot Regiment, in which he served for six years in Ireland. Grey proposed in 1836 to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Glenelg, that he and another officer should explore the country to the north of Perth, Western Australia, in the hope of finding a major river giving access to lands suitable for settlement. He led two expeditions, but they were ill planned and badly executed. While in Western Australia, Grey was promoted captain and appointed resident magistrate at King George Sound. At this time Grey became interested in the cultures and government of indigenous peoples, promoting the theory of compulsory assimilation with the British settlers.

⁹⁰ Edmund Bohan, To Be a Hero: A Biography of Sir George Grey, Auckland: HarperCollins, 1998, p.12

After returning to England Grey was offered the governorship of South Australia, a position that he embraced with great energy. In 1845 he was appointed governor of New Zealand, where his greatest success was probably his management of Maori affairs in the years 1845-1853. Grey, who was awarded the KGB in 1848, enjoyed great mana among Maori, while with the settlers his relations were often less happy. Nevertheless he was the chief author of the constitution of 1852 which set up both provincial and central representative assemblies. Late in 1853 Grey departed to become Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa.

In 1860 war had broken out in Taranaki, New Zealand, over the disputed purchase of the Waitara block. Grey offered to return to New Zealand, in the hope that his great mana would enable him to make peace. His offer was accepted. In the later 1860s the British government determined to withdraw imperial troops from the colonies, and force them to accept responsibility for their own internal security. With the support of his ministers, however, Grey constantly evaded carrying out instructions to finalise the return of the regiments. In the end the British government had little alternative but to terminate the appointment of so headstrong a governor in 1868. Grey soon went to England, where he failed in an attempt to enter Parliament as a Gladstonian Liberal. He then returned to New Zealand, where he lived on Kawau Island, in the Hauraki Gulf. From there he emerged in 1874 to lead the fight against Julius Vogel's proposal to abolish the provincial governments set up under the 1852 Constitution.

In 1875 Grey was elected superintendent of Auckland province and also to Parliament for Auckland City West. In October 1877 he became Premier. However, in 1879 the government lost a division in the House, and then failed to win a majority in the ensuing election. After the defection of four Auckland members, Grey resigned in October 1879. He remained in Parliament as a backbencher, but had little political influence or standing. Yet he was chosen by Parliament to be one of three New Zealand representatives at the Australian Federal Convention in Sydney in 1891, opposing New Zealand's federation with Australia. Grey was also a keen naturalist and an assiduous collector of manuscripts, incunabula and other rare books, and established important libraries at Capetown and

Auckland, presenting them with his collections of books. He took a scholarly interest in Maori language, history and culture. Although re-elected to the House of Representatives in 1893, Grey left for England in the following year and did not return. He died in 1898 and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral.⁹¹

Prior to a discussion of Bohan's biography, the earlier biographies need to be looked at. The first three studies, by William Rees, 1892, George Henderson, 1907, and James Collier, 1909, were all written towards the end of, or soon after, the Victorian era. This was the age of hero-worship in which the assumed qualities of heroic individuals set the standards of morality and patriotism. Each of the above authors knew Grey personally, and each of the works, in different ways, lean towards hagiography. The first, The Life and Times of Sir George Grey, K.C.B. was written in 1892, by Grey's friend and confidante William Lee Rees.⁹² As James Collier later claimed: "Rees's relations with Grey in his later years were of the most intimate character; no-one was more conversant with his affairs; no-one better knew his mind on all subjects of a public nature; no-one had rendered him so many services; he enjoyed unequalled opportunities of hearing the whole story of his career...at least as it appeared to Grey."⁹³ Because of this close relationship between the author and his subject, the work is highly subjective, with no effort made by Rees to view the life of his hero dispassionately. It is based on Grey's reminiscences late in life, with his facts, his sentiments, and his vindication of himself. The record is not completely veracious; certain events have been dramatised; certain accounts are more graphic than correct; certain facts are omitted; some narratives have a romantic tone that can only have been derived from Grey's imagination.⁹⁴ Oblivious to these shortcomings, Rees presented his subject as the archetypal hero, and "rest[s] contented with the knowledge that some portion of the greatness of a great life, some of the radiance which streams from an illustrious character, will be enjoyed by those who rescue from possible oblivion the record of noble deeds, and who rear for study and

⁹¹ Keith Sinclair, 'Grey, George', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol.1, 1990:160-164

⁹² William Lee Rees and L. Rees, The Life and Times of Sir George Grey, K.C.B., London: Hutchinson, 1892

⁹³ James Collier, Sir George Grey: Governor, High Commissioner, and Premier: An Historical Biography, Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., 1909, p.vii

⁹⁴ Ibid.

emulation of generations yet to come the figure of a man at once great and simple, powerful and unselfish.”⁹⁵

Sir George Grey: Pioneer of Empire in Southern Lands, by George Henderson, 1907,⁹⁶ has none of the immediacy that is characteristic of Rees’s book, but also none of the hyperbole. Henderson has endeavoured to make his book both a genuine piece of historical research and a serious study using original documents. From this study new facts emerge, and Grey’s character is more fully exposed. Henderson provides us with a more impartial view of his subject, presenting both sides of important arguments of the day, and takes an independent view of controversial questions. He suggests that mistakes in assessing Grey had arisen from the inability of critics to understand that a man whose temperament was essentially autocratic might be dominated by convictions extremely radical.⁹⁷ However, he leaves many problems unsolved, such as the reasons that Grey may have had for taking the actions that he did and the implications of those actions.

James Collier returns to a more personal approach in his biography. Writing Sir George Grey: Governor, High Commissioner, and Premier: an historical biography, in 1909, Collier has found most useful the impressions he gained from his personal relationship with Grey, and the information about himself that Grey communicated. Collier’s biography has been written from this impressionist perspective. Although a gifted orator, Grey had a naturally reticent personality, but occasionally, to those who knew him well, he revealed greater depths to his character. Then, says Collier “every utterance became significant, and every action charged with meaning.”⁹⁸ The author was also well acquainted with many of the former friends of Grey, his subordinates in the old days, colleagues in later years, and from them he learnt much about the Governor and the Premier, the legislator and the man. Collier correctly states that the whole story of a life so full and so varied has been told by none of his biographers. But then, he does not either. Nevertheless, he claims that, with all the omissions, it remains the record of a very

⁹⁵ Rees, p.590

⁹⁶ George Henderson, Sir George Grey: Pioneer of Empire in Southern Lands, London: Dent, 1907

⁹⁷ Henderson, p.4

⁹⁸ Collier, p.xi

great career. Remaining within the context of Carlylean hero interpretations, Collier promotes his subject's virtues and ignores his faults. "By his energy and wisdom, his originalities and audacities, [Grey] rose, head and shoulders, above all colonial governors." In his opinion, "he will ever be one of the greatest figures in the colonial history of the Empire."⁹⁹

Over time Victorian hagiography gave way to a striving for veracity that is typical of twentieth century biography. After two World Wars writers became more cynical and their heroes were reduced to more realistic proportions. Their past actions came to be considered not only in relation to their own time but also in comparison with the writers' present, as they took into account the ramifications of those actions. In comparison to the previous three biographies of Grey, that of James Rutherford, Sir George Grey: A Study in Colonial Government, 1961, is more balanced.¹⁰⁰ The personality of Grey, the character of the man, however, remains elusive. Rutherford, having the advantage of source material unavailable to previous authors, is almost wholly concerned with Grey the official and office-holder. He explains his approach in the preface:

I have tried to reconstruct and analyse the principal situations with which Grey had to deal, to enter into his strange mind in order to explain his actions from his own point of view, and then to detach myself and judge his behaviour impartially. I find much to admire and much to blame. If, as so eminent a writer as Andre Maurois contends, it is not the biographer's job to pass judgment my own opinions are readily distinguishable from the narrative and may be discarded by the reader at will, leaving... a reasonably faithful account of events. But it has seemed to me that the truth lies in the interpretation of the material facts rather than in the facts themselves, and that to have presented the evidence without the summing up then the verdict would have been to arrest the process of investigation halfway.¹⁰¹

In taking this approach, Rutherford has helped the reader towards a better understanding of his subject. Oliver acknowledges that through this book we can now know a great deal more about Grey than was remotely possible before. As well, certain cloudy areas in New Zealand history, such as the treatment of land problems and the discussion of confiscation, for the first time emerge into the full light of day. For its clarity and

⁹⁹ Collier, p.xii

¹⁰⁰ J. Rutherford, Sir George Grey: A Study in Colonial Government, London: Cassell, 1961

¹⁰¹ Rutherford, p.v

detachment, and its careful documentation, he believes that this Life laid a necessary foundation for the study of that history¹⁰².

To Be a Hero: A Biography of Sir George Grey, 1998, by Edmund Bohan was one of a number of biographies of historical figures that were commissioned during the 1990s to mark the sesquicentenary of New Zealand. It presented Bohan with an opportunity to build upon the foundation laid by Rutherford, in order to further the understanding of why so many policies, which continue to affect race relations, economic and political developments in this country, took the particular form that they did. The habit of returning repeatedly to the same biographical subject, Law and Hughes suggest, may account in part for the notion that, at times, modern biographies do not so much demythologize lives as they remythologize them for our own needs, which follows a pattern familiar in Victorian (and earlier) biography.¹⁰³ Holmes maintains that certain lives "hold particular mirrors up to each succeeding generation of biographers, almost as the classical myths were endlessly retold by the Greek dramatists, to renew their own versions of contemporary identity."¹⁰⁴ The retelling, however, need not be heroic, particularly if the age does not see itself as heroic. Edmund Bohan, in this biography, attempted to throw further light on the nearest thing to a hero, in the Carlylean sense, that New Zealand produced. He then had the opportunity to build on the earlier biographies of Grey. Bohan, however, chose not to do this. Instead, he remythologises Grey in late twentieth century terms, accepting the myth of "Good Governor Grey" that was taught to generations of school children, but making no further analysis about his character or motivations.

Edmund Bohan, historian, novelist and opera-singer, brings to his work the accuracy and detail of research-based evidence, as well as a familiarity with the drama and rhetoric of the performing arts. This gives his biography of Grey a unique style as he skillfully

¹⁰² W.H. Oliver, 'Review' [Sir George Grey: A Study in Colonial Government, by J. Rutherford] Landfall, September, 1961; 59: 284

¹⁰³ Joe Law and Linda K. Hughes, 'Victorian Biography Today', Biographical Passages: Essays on Victorian and Modernist Biography, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000, p.13

¹⁰⁴ Richard Holmes, 'Biography: Inventing the Truth', The Art of Literary Biography, John Batchelor, (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p.19

guides the reader through the complexities of the 1860s political scene in New Zealand. The work is tightly structured yet lighter in tone than previous biographies and is very readable. The form is descriptive rather than analytical, and the portrait is sympathetically sketched. Bohan admits his feelings of ambivalence towards Grey, but is even-handed in the treatment of both his virtues and his shortcomings. One of these defects, the governor's perpetual construction of a self-promoting personal image in his speeches and writings, is included as an integral part of the narrative. The work also reveals a great deal about the prime concerns of the day, such as the power of the Crown and its agents, but because of the biographical mode, Bohan does not venture far into theory and context, and is short on analysis. The subject is the centre of attention, and it is this narrow focus that provides the narrative drive. The pace, however, allows little opportunity to explain Grey's beliefs.

Bohan's stated aim was to present the facts of the life as fully as evidence allowed, and he ultimately sees Grey "as a flawed yet great man within the terms of his time, even a tragic hero."¹⁰⁵ He does not, however, make any assessment of Grey. Was he, as Sinclair concluded, "one of the most remarkable nineteenth century British colonial governors, and one of the most remarkable people who have lived in New Zealand"?¹⁰⁶ Or was he, as Wards suggests, "so tarnished by constant trickery and deceit, so demonstrably dishonest in his dispatches to the Colonial Office, so incapable of loyalty to either equals or subordinates, that he failed to achieve his lifelong ambition to be a hero, a man to be admired through the ages for his achievements and noble qualities"?¹⁰⁷ Bohan decided that the ideological gulf that separated the late twentieth century from the nineteenth increased the difficulties of assessing so perverse and complex a man.¹⁰⁸ He leaves the decision up to the reader, a tactic used by biographers who do not consider making judgments part of their function. Even so, as this is the fifth biography of Grey, it is reasonable to expect that the author should have been able to recognise and explain the complexities of his subject, and to give an appraisal, rather than simply an account, of his

¹⁰⁵ Bohan, p.13

¹⁰⁶ Keith Sinclair, 'George Grey', p.164

¹⁰⁷ Ian Wards, 'Review' [*To Be a Hero*], *Landfall*, Autumn 1999: 167

¹⁰⁸ Bohan, p.12

actions. In neglecting to do this, Bohan fails to convey a believable historical portrait, and does little more than humanise the perspective of Grey that has emerged from other biographies.

In Brooking's view, Bohan's central thesis, that Grey thought of himself as a Carlylean hero (that is, as a great man shaping the course of history), does not add to any understanding of this complex and enigmatic figure.¹⁰⁹ Instead, as Francis points out, he emphasises Carlyle's nineteenth century method, which focuses upon heroes as spiritual representatives of their age, but then interprets Grey's beliefs and actions in the light of the late twentieth century.¹¹⁰ He makes some psychological insinuations about him but avoids analysis of his character in depth, even though there are, as Cadogan notes, definable symptoms of delusion and paranoia in Grey's personality, and despite his apparent dysfunctional characteristics being implicated in political events.¹¹¹ Erikson believes that while the psychoanalytic method rarely contributes much to the explanation of the excellence of a man's performance, it may indicate what freed him for his own excellence or what may have inhibited or spoilt it.¹¹² Further insight would also have been gained by comparisons of Grey with other governors, between this author's portrait, and earlier portraits of Grey, and between his personality changes at different ages and times of his various roles in New Zealand. No such material has been included. Although the significance of Grey, the man and his actions, must necessarily change with time, Bohan, in this biography, has maintained the status quo.

To add to our understanding of the complex and enigmatic subject of this biography, more background information was required. Bohan makes little attempt to explain the often confusing constitutional and political context in which Grey operated. He needed, for example, to explain how the Colonial Office in London, and its officials, determined

¹⁰⁹ Tom Brooking, 'Complexities of Grey lost in author's haste', [Review of *To Be a Hero*], *Otago Daily Times*, 3 February, 1999, p.22

¹¹⁰ Mark Francis, 'Grey: Paradoxical New Zealander', [Review of *To Be a Hero*], *Political Science*, December 2000; 52(2): 166

¹¹¹ Bernard Cadogan, 'Review' [*To Be a Hero*], *New Zealand Journal of History*, 1999; 33(1): 116

¹¹² Erik Erikson, 'On the Nature of Psychohistorical Evidence: In Search of Gandhi', *Explorations in Psychohistory: The Wellfleet Papers*, Robert Jay Lifton, (ed.), New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978, p.66

its administration of the vast British Empire.¹¹³ In describing Earl Grey's initial constitution, which reached New Zealand in April 1847, as "devised by minds ignorant of colonial practicalities, drawn up without consulting settlers or governor, not backed by an informed analysis of New Zealand's needs or conditions – it was preposterous,"¹¹⁴ Bohan is making sweeping assertions. Little attempt has been made to explain, or to absorb, later studies about the constitutional and political context. Neither are the ramifications of Grey's race-relations policies explored in detail. His approach simply does not provide enough of this new material. The considerable historical scholarship carried out since Rutherford's volume was published in 1961 should have been incorporated into this work for it to be a full and up-to-date account.

Of major importance is the fact that Bohan neglects to consider in any depth the consequences of the actions of this indisputably autocratic man. As Wards asks: "what effect did his constant misrepresentation have on colonial policy? If the Colonial Secretary had been correctly informed on the wide range of material covered in Grey's dispatches, would his decisions and his instructions have been different? Was Grey's period in office in New Zealand the strong medicine that was needed for the long-term health of an emerging colony of mixed racial settlement?"¹¹⁵ In Brooking's opinion, "Grey's complexity, subtlety and duplicity – expressed in the gaping gap between his noble-sounding rhetoric and high-minded intentions and his often dubious actions... seem disturbingly contemporary."¹¹⁶ Francis suggests that this careless use of intentionality seems to be part of an unconscious polemicisation of colonial history that allows modern writers to become involved with past actions as if they were participants.¹¹⁷ This "hindsight" historiography, he believes, is accompanied by a strong sense of nationalism. Ideally, he maintains, a scholar should be able to distinguish between historical motives and twentieth century motivations.¹¹⁸ If the emphasis of the biography had been shifted away from the qualities of Grey, and policy been made the focus, with an

¹¹³ Brooking, 'Complexities of Grey', p.22

¹¹⁴ Bohan, p.90

¹¹⁵ Wards, p.167

¹¹⁶ Tom Brooking, 'The pommie twit and the puppetmaster', [Review of *To Be a Hero*], *New Zealand Books*, June, 1999; 9(2), p.20

¹¹⁷ Francis, p.172

¹¹⁸ Francis, p.173

acknowledgement that a successful combination of an abstract (if accidental) morality with practical politics was beyond the reach of nineteenth century statesmen, then perhaps a real advance in our understanding of our history could have been made.¹¹⁹ This is not, however, necessarily the job of the biographer, who is free to choose his own perspective on the Life he is recreating. On the other hand, an up-to-date, analytical biography of Grey is of particular importance as New Zealand is still working, in the early twenty-first century, to come to terms with the impact of his policies and its own cultural identity.

Another major problem arises with the reliance on a chronological technique in relating the life of such a peripatetic pro-consul. Grey's context includes Australia and its colonies, New Zealand, South Africa, England and Canada, in fact the British Empire in his lifetime, and it includes developments upon which he made no personal impact. Moreover, the story of the official life of a man as important as Grey is the story of the countries in which he held office. In relating him to this country only, it amounts to a history of New Zealand between 1845 and 1853, between 1861 and 1868, and between 1870 and 1892. There is a conspicuous lack of any history of New Zealand between 1853 and 1861, while he was in South Africa, a crucial decade in which responsible government had been achieved in New Zealand and the Maori wars had begun. Also, Grey's successes and failures in this country will not be understood unless attention is given first to the South Australian formative period, and later to the South African term. The first gave to Grey that confidence in himself that directed his life and gave him the authority to deal with the great problems of early New Zealand; the second was a period of disillusionment from which Grey had not the greatness to learn his own weaknesses and limitations.¹²⁰

This work is no more than a traditional political biography, dated in style and approach, in which the essential issues do not emerge and there is little additional material. Olssen believes, however, that this is a virtue; that Bohan's traditionalist methodology, devoid of

¹¹⁹ Wards, p.168

¹²⁰ Lawrence Rogers, 'Book Review' [*To Be a Hero*], *Historical Review*, September 1961; 9(3): 145

post-modern peculiarities, enables him to relate what happened based on evidence, not what fits into any pre-conceived theory or prejudice. On the other hand, he notes, the introduction and testing of hypotheses, the transparent introduction of ideology and measuring of both against empirical evidence, add immense value to the chronicles of the traditionalists.¹²¹ Finally, there is the absence of a proper conclusion. The last chapter, relating Grey's sad decline into old age and senility, is not the perceptive reckoning, not the balance sheet that the end of the twentieth century was looking for.¹²² This biography of Grey is therefore inadequate as a mark of the anniversary of his death for which it was commissioned. As Bohan admits, another biography is both inevitable and necessary. He has left plenty for others to do.

¹²¹ Erik Olssen, 'To be a hero in Britain's colonies', [Review of To Be a Hero], Dominion, 7 November, 1998, p.20

¹²² Wards, p.166

BERNARD FREYBERG V.C., SOLDIER OF TWO NATIONS, Paul Freyberg, London; Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991

Michael King has described the life story of New Zealand's foremost military figure as "the equivalent of the log cabin to White House fable – that of a colonial who returns to the Motherland and succeeds in the stratified society his ancestors abandoned. Katherine Mansfield did it; Dan Davin did it. Most spectacularly of all, Bernard Freyberg did it".¹²³ Freyberg was born in England in 1889, emigrating with his family, at the age of two, to New Zealand, where he spent his formative years. While still at school he became a prominent athlete and national swimming champion. Later as a young man, discontented with his career as a dentist, he left New Zealand in 1914 "to see the world and find out what it had to offer".¹²⁴ Arriving in London, just three weeks after the outbreak of World War I, Freyberg was soon gazetted as a temporary Lieutenant in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. According to his son, this was the turning point of Freyberg's life.¹²⁵ After two and a half years of action, he had achieved the rank of Brigadier-General, had been wounded nine times, won a DSO and bar for his night swim to the beaches of Gallipoli, and was the recipient of a Victoria Cross for heroism during the battle of Ancre on the Somme in 1916. In World War II he commanded the Second New Zealand Division, from 1939-45, which was engaged in much combat, including that in Greece and Crete where Freyberg was made Commander-in-Chief at Churchill's instigation. He played a major role in the relief of Tobruk, at Alam Halfa, and at El Alamein where Montgomery put him in charge of "Supercharge", the operation that led to the final defeat of the Germans in North Africa. Thereafter he commanded the New Zealand Division throughout the Italian campaign. After the war, he went on to become Governor-General of New Zealand, and receive a barony and the Lieutenant-Governorship of Windsor Castle. All these career milestones are thoroughly documented in this biography written by his son.

¹²³ Michael King, [Review] 'Monumental achievement', *Metro*, Oct 1991; 124: 154

¹²⁴ Paul Freyberg, Bernard Freyberg V.C., Soldier of Two Nations, London; Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991

¹²⁵ Freyberg, p.37

1989 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, and the seventy-fifth since the beginning of World War I. To commemorate these events, a number of war books were produced, among them this biography of New Zealand's most famous soldier. Three "unofficial" biographies or memoirs had previously been written about the general by officers who fought under his command during his most consequential years of World War II, 1941-45. None, however, attempted a complete life and times of Freyberg, and all indulged in a degree of hagiography.*

General Lord Freyberg VC: An Unofficial Biography, by Peter Singleton-Gates was published in 1963, the year of Freyberg's death.¹²⁶ This book, by one of his soldiers, to whom he stands "above all other men", is, as Singleton-Gates admits, "a sincere, probably inadequate endeavour to portray for those who have known two wars and the youth of a new generation, the fantastic courage, the purposeful and unswerving character, the devotion to duty and the unending care for the well-being of those he commanded, of this man of mighty deed and humble heart".¹²⁷ Written from a highly subjective viewpoint, it is filled with such hyperbole. It is his tribute to one he describes as "New Zealand's finest soldier".¹²⁸

Major-General W.G. Stevens' book, Freyberg, VC: The Man 1939-45, published in 1965, is also a personal memoir.¹²⁹ As Freyberg's Chief Administrative Officer, Stevens was in close contact with Freyberg for nearly six years, and came to form the highest opinion of him as a leader, a diplomat, and as a man. It is the human aspect of Freyberg in World War II that concerns this author. As he states, it is not a biography of Bernard Freyberg, nor is it a full account of his career as commander of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force. That, he believes, is a task for an official biographer. There is also no assessment of his tactical handling of the Second New Zealand Division, which is a

* In an unpublished paper Ian McGibbon mentioned that biographers and historians alike could not say anything critical about Freyberg in the 1950s. He was not only a war hero, but also Governor General. And in any case, in those days biography was much more deferential and respectful of persons.

¹²⁶ Peter Singleton-Gates, General Lord Freyberg VC: An Unofficial Biography, London: Michael Joseph, 1963

¹²⁷ Singleton-Gates, p.9

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Major-General W.G. Stevens, Freyberg VC: The Man 1939-45, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1965

task for official historians. All he is attempting is a memoir of Freyberg the man, as he knew him in the Expeditionary Force.¹³⁰ He draws on his own experiences, or from conversations at the time with others who were serving Freyberg, receiving from them their opinions of him either broadly (and it was the tremendous breadth of Freyberg that was most impressive) or in one particular aspect, often illustrated with anecdotes.

Freyberg: Churchill's Salamander, by Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Cavell, is a study of a different kind, a more balanced account of their subject as a military man.¹³¹ Published in 1989, some fifteen years after the declassification of certain intelligence material, this enabled them to consider Freyberg's command capability in a new light. Despite appraisal in numerous books, articles, and lectures, although his leadership capacity had been analysed by Churchill and Montgomery, the authors of this book are convinced that there was yet more to say about New Zealand's premier World War II commander. As they maintain, "the ledger of history is never closed... its balance must be reappraised whenever new evidence is offered or new questions are raised".¹³² Here they contradict previous accounts that questioned Freyberg's competence, and describe him as cautious, examine his battle plans, and explain why he deserved to be called the "Salamander of the British Empire".¹³³

In a foreword to the book, Sir Leonard Thornton and Sir John White, two officers who served on Freyberg's headquarters staff during World War II, note that the indelible impression that Freyberg had left on them, and many others, was the quality of his leadership. They point out that the authors have been deliberately selective in their examination of Freyberg's career, concentrating on three battles, those at Crete, Mareth and Cassino, when "the fortunes of war went against him". These were battles in which Freyberg has attracted criticism by some modern historians, such as John McLeod in his book Myth and Reality.¹³⁴ The aim of this biography is to examine these criticisms with

¹³⁰ Stevens, p.9

¹³¹ Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Cavell, Freyberg: Churchill's Salamander, Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1989

¹³² Barber and Tonkin-Cavell, p.viii

¹³³ A salamander is a mythical lizard that is believed to be able to live and move in the heart of the fire.

¹³⁴ Barber and Tonkin-Cavell, p. vi; John McLeod, Myth and Reality, Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986

the intention of answering the claim that Freyberg revealed limitations in his command ability. Yet Grey notes that there is no sense of engagement with Freyberg's critics - nowhere do the authors tackle the criticisms head on.¹³⁵ Instead, they have based their conclusions on a methodical analysis of the evidence, approaching the problems fairly, and have put forward a formidable case. Thornton and White, however, do not agree with every inference drawn or conclusion reached. For example, that Freyberg's reputation was gravely injured by criticisms after Crete, or that his relations with the New Zealand Government were seriously impaired. But, as they point out, whether or not the arguments are convincing, it must be agreed that Freyberg's leadership stands unchallenged.

Paul Freyberg presents a more comprehensive account of the life of his famous father, yet there are still omissions. He notes in the introduction to his biography, published in 1991, that it had been his father's intention to write his own memoirs. After completing a number of chapters, however, he suggested to his son that he might consider writing his biography instead, after his death. He regarded his biography as a very personal matter, which he preferred should be kept within the family. He did not want it to be written by a professional who would not have known him personally.¹³⁶ This suggests that he wished to have some control over what was included in his biography, for it to be a sympathetic narrative of his life, rather than an impartial or critical review. Further, he reminded his son, as he had spent half his life in England and the other half in New Zealand or in the service of New Zealand, few in England knew much about his New Zealand life, and fewer New Zealanders were aware of his English background. Only members of his family knew about both. Freyberg then told his son where he could best find out about his early life. Much of what followed, concerning his father's career in World War II, came from Paul's own observations and recollections during his own career in the army. Paul does not acknowledge, however, that these impressions were as they seemed to him personally at the time, and that it cannot possibly be the whole picture. He has used very

¹³⁵ Jeffrey Grey, 'Review' [Freyberg: Churchill's Salamander], *New Zealand International Review*, Jul/Aug 1990; 15(4): 29

¹³⁶ Freyberg, p.2

few secondary sources, and has left most public archives untouched. When the war was finally over Freyberg began to tell Paul more about what had happened in Crete in particular, but it was not until the year before he died that he told him about ULTRA and the part it had played in the events leading up to the German invasion. The secret was not declassified until some twelve years later. Freyberg had been deeply frustrated at his inability to defend himself against criticism concerning his leadership in the battle for Crete. This became an obsession for Freyberg in his last years, since he was never able to discover what had gone wrong, and that is why he handed over the task to his son, in the hope that he would be able to discover what had eluded him. Much of the impetus for this book came from this obsession as the preoccupation seems to be shared by his son. It became the focus of this biography.

Paul Freyberg writes from a British viewpoint. In contrast to New Zealand biographers, he has been influenced neither by masculinist culture nor egalitarian myth. At ease when describing his father's connections with the English aristocracy, Paul seems less certain when relating Freyberg's early life in Wellington, or his later period in New Zealand as Governor General, experiences with which the son was unfamiliar. As for Bernard Freyberg himself, although he loved New Zealand, and respected his New Zealand soldiers, he made no pretence that he was a New Zealander, despite his early life here. His rise to professional eminence was through the Royal Naval Division and the British Army. His career as Beevor puts it "was endowed with the muscular morality of the Edwardian hero".¹³⁷ Culturally, and in his professional connections, he was totally British.

Appropriately, the bulk of the book concerns Freyberg's career in the two World Wars, and it is in this context that the author serves his subject well. Paul had a close relationship with his father, as well as their having a profession in common as soldiers, yet this has not led to loss of critical distance when recording his father's actions. He does not, however, make any analysis of him as a commander or tactician. At the onset of World War II, Freyberg was employed as a British army officer seconded to the New

¹³⁷ Antony Beevor, Crete: The Battle and the Resistance, London: John Murray, 1991, p.82

Zealand forces. Under his leadership, the New Zealand Division acquired its high reputation as a fighting force. The author here reinforces the stereotype of the New Zealand soldier as he identifies two reasons in particular for that reputation. The first was attributed to the high quality of its officers and men; the second was because they were trained in the field to a more exacting standard than other divisions, often better than that reached by units of the Regular British Army.¹³⁸ Belich questions whether the New Zealanders did in fact have an edge. "Did the myth of the Martial Kiwi have a kernel of truth?" And he suggests that much was manipulated by the New Zealanders making this claim.¹³⁹ He adds that adverse circumstance was the official explanation of defeat, when defeat was recognised.¹⁴⁰ The loss of Crete, he believes, was clearly due to the inability of at least three New Zealand commanders to cope with the pace of modern war. "The persistent effort to exclude a fourth – Freyberg himself – from blame is unconvincing."¹⁴¹ Paul Freyberg leans heavily on his father's extensive records concerning this stage of the war. According to Beevor, however, military history was not the way it was written by ex-generals – "like a chess-board with divisions being moved here and there" without analysis or comment.¹⁴² Nor should biography be written in this manner.

Despite Freyberg's outstanding achievements, his greatest defeat is central to this biography. In 1941 he was ordered to command the defence of Crete against an airborne German assault. Paul explains his father's reluctance to accept the command, knowing Crete to be ultimately undefendable. Successive historians have accused Freyberg of repulsing the attack, only to lose the island because of a crucial error. In fact, according to Paul, the British had broken the German military codes, but this information, ULTRA, which gave them advanced knowledge of the German invasion plan, could not be used without alerting the Germans as to its source. Freyberg could thus not alter his troop dispositions to reinforce the airfield at Maleme without compromising ULTRA.

¹³⁸ Freyberg, p.339

¹³⁹ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001, p.275

¹⁴⁰ Belich, p.276

¹⁴¹ Belich, p.277

¹⁴² Antony Beevor, 'The Battles of Beevor', *The Bulletin*, 3 June 2003, p.29

King finds these chapters not entirely satisfying, with elements of filial piety overtaking the more exacting criteria of the military historian.¹⁴³ Pugsley believes that Paul tries too hard in using the ULTRA question to explain why Crete fell. He does not believe that Freyberg was constrained in his deployment of his weakened New Zealand Division. As he says, other accounts have quite rightly blamed Freyberg's subordinates for failing to show the same resolve as their commander in this battle. Indeed, he adds, this is one section in the book where the author loses balance to a degree that does his father less than justice.¹⁴⁴ Beevor rejects the thesis put forward by Paul as a "revisionist theory of events".¹⁴⁵ He disagrees with Paul's claim that he believed his father had acted as he did to conceal the fact that the British had cracked German intelligence codes. This Beevor regards as "nonsense" as, on several occasions, Freyberg had used ULTRA information in his instructions.¹⁴⁶ In a letter to the editor of the *Listener*, however, Ryan states that she has never read anything that would persuade her to support these views of Beevor. She suggests that perhaps he had formed his opinions of Freyberg after researching British military archives [which Paul Freyberg did not do]. "If so", adds Ryan, "it would appear that Freyberg has been made a scapegoat".¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Freyberg survived this defeat, regaining the confidence of his troops, fellow officers, and Churchill. Yet Crete continued to frustrate him, and he died in 1963, unable to defend his actions while ULTRA remained classified top secret.

The North African campaign chapters that follow in Paul's biography are dominated by Freyberg's developing command self-confidence and the battles discussed, while the Sangro and Cassino campaigns, in Italy, are dealt with in one chapter. These were campaigns in which Freyberg had two constant aims: the welfare of his troops, and that their lives be not squandered. As a consequence, there were few among the thousands of men who served in the New Zealand Division who did not respect and admire him. Freyberg and the Second Division ended World War II in Trieste, in a tense confrontation with the Yugoslav Fourth Army. The concluding chapters on Freyberg's exploits as

¹⁴³ King, [Book Review] *Metro*, Oct 1991; 124: 156

¹⁴⁴ Christopher Pugsley, [Review] 'Rounded Portrait of Freyberg the Man', *Evening Post*, 2 Aug 1991:5

¹⁴⁵ Antony Beevor, *Crete*, p.91

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Gaynor Ryan, 'Freyberg on Crete', Letter to the Editor, *Listener*, 5 July 2003, p.9

Governor-General of New Zealand, and as Deputy Constable and Lieutenant-Governor of Windsor, are less substantial than those before them.

By recording such an accumulation of detail from personal recollections, eyewitness accounts, and quotations from Freyberg's letters and diaries, Paul puts the emphasis on his father's overall humanity. Rather than the details of Freyberg's battles, his command appreciations and decisions, it is Freyberg the man that his son presents. The general it seems was a man of great charm, boundless energy, sensitivity, and of well-honed military professionalism. As Paul explains, he also had a quality that is difficult to define or analyse accurately, but which nevertheless played a large part in his achievement.¹⁴⁸ This was the quality of "greatness". Paul points out that his father was born without family influence, or wealth. What he accomplished came as a result of his own efforts. He had his reverses as well as successes, but he was basically unmoved by either.¹⁴⁹ Pugsley agrees that Freyberg had "greatness", noting that he said himself that he was a lucky man, but that it was more than that; in war the talented commander creates his opportunities, and Freyberg did just that. Pugsley advises readers that there is still much that can be written on his tactical ability and staff relationships, and that a balanced picture of Freyberg and the battle of Crete are yet to emerge. To him, however, this book captures the man, and is bigger than its chapters on Crete.¹⁵⁰

On the other hand, Fox faults the biography for being neither objective nor critical. He thinks that the combination of reminiscences and anecdotes, together with the accounts of Freyberg's campaigns, amount merely to a description of what Freyberg did, rather than what he thought at the time. Freyberg's performance as a commander is not evaluated, and, given his emphasis on Crete, Paul fails to explain the failure to reinforce Maleme once the battle had commenced. Orange notes that the controversy over the bombing of Monte Cassino in 1944 is accorded only a cursory mention, Paul neglecting to explore as

¹⁴⁸ Freyberg, p.578

¹⁴⁹ Freyberg, p.578

¹⁵⁰ Pugsley, p.5

thoroughly as a biographer of Freyberg must, the decision to bomb the great Benedictine Abbey.¹⁵¹

A biography in which the author has a close relationship with the subject generally involves understandable sympathy, tempting the author to overstep the bounds of truthful and verifiable statement. To suppress part of the truth deliberately, or through restricted access to information, however elevated the motives, is to produce a substitution of a part for the whole. King feels that "in a few respects Paul's book is closer to autobiography (even 'alibiobiography') than biography. It bears a resemblance to the memoirs that Bernard Freyberg might have written himself had he been able to focus his attention on the task".¹⁵² He also notes a strong element of apologia. Some potentially embarrassing episodes are also passed over, there is little exploration of motivation and character, and there is far too little about the crucial years of childhood. There is no mention – even to dismiss them – of some of the more bizarre stories surrounding Freyberg (such as the story that Freyberg was, at one stage, enamoured of the New Zealand politician Mabel Howard). There are also a number of inaccuracies that a professional writer could have been expected to erase:

Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, the book is a substantial achievement. With a fair-minded approach to his subject and to his subject's critics, Paul has constructed a highly readable biography of his distinguished father. The breadth and depth of research is considerable, despite McNeish sensing that, from the Greece campaign onwards, Paul had to fight his own battles to gain access to files the War Office in London would prefer to have withheld.¹⁵³ The writing is also admirably clear, even in matters of complexity, and, for the most part, detached. The fact that he has been able to accomplish this without any professional background in journalism, history or biography makes the achievement all the more admirable.

¹⁵¹ Vincent Orange, 'New Zealand's most famous soldier', [Review of Bernard Freyberg V.C., Soldier of Two Nations], The Press, November 16, 1991: 126

¹⁵² King, [Review] Metro, Oct 1991; 124: 156

¹⁵³ James McNeish, 'A general who had no-one to talk to', [Review of Bernard Freyberg V.C., Soldier of Two Nations], The Dominion, 10 Aug 1991: 7

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN TOO

Biographies that have contributed most to the development of the genre (Plutarch's Lives, Boswell's Life of Johnson, Strachey's Eminent Victorians, for example) are those that have broken the mould of tradition. These pivotal works emerged within powerful cultural movements, out of which new forms, questions, responsibilities and issues arise. They not only brought forward new choices, but also forced new decisions on biographers.¹⁵⁴ One of the most important cultural movements of the twentieth century was the rise of 'second-wave' feminism in the 1970s. This chapter reflects on some of the ways in which aspects of feminism has permeated biography as women writers began to call into question the traditional paradigms of the biographical genre.

Historically, biographies with their 'great man' format and masculine discourse had ignored the place of women in society. Feminists believed that women's lives must be made visible, and any method of telling those lives, should reflect female subjectivity and provide space for the distinctive nature of women's experience. Feminism influenced biography by highlighting these gender differences, some centred on the special challenges in writing the lives of women, and some centred on discernible differences among biographies of and by men, those of women by men, and those of and by women.¹⁵⁵ In addition, an increasing number of readers were women, and their ideas of what facts were interesting also brought changes to the genre. As a result, from the 1970s onwards, a new kind of biography, and biographer, emerged.

Many of the differences between biographies about men and women, and also between the practices of male and female biographers, come from the different lives men and women live, which was especially marked in the past, and the different expectations held

¹⁵⁴ Paula Backscheider, Reflections on Biography, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.127

¹⁵⁵ Backscheider, p.128

for them. The notion of "greatness" or "importance" is firmly rooted in its historical and social context, associated with particular persons and not others - those at the top of the stratification systems of the West based on sex, class, race, religion. The writing of women's lives is problematic in part because so few women have had the kind of success that attracts notice. For all the professed interest in women's lives, the cultural assumption remains that most women who have biographies written about them are eccentric rather than exemplary, and eccentricity is not a trait that wins admiration.¹⁵⁶ As Gerda Lerner, the groundbreaking feminist historian, points out: "we still do not really know how to relate women who have been historical agents to the larger picture of historical change".¹⁵⁷ Recent biographers see this positioning as an important part of their work, but are still struggling to articulate women's exceptionality. These struggles, and especially recent feminist work that has called attention to them, changed biography and forced different decisions about evidence, life-course, and thematic emphases on biographers.¹⁵⁸ And, in feminist and cultural political terms, they found that the "obscure" can be at least, and are sometimes considerably more, significant historically than the famous or infamous.

Although women's biography has much in common with biography of male subjects and their external, public existences, telling women's lives is less predictable. Most women's lives are a tightly woven mesh of public and private events, and this combined identity likely to be the primary definition of their "selfhood".¹⁵⁹ This requires different structures to be created for women's biography. The subject's accomplishments have to be identified, the motivations that drive her choices recognised, and the decision to do more than lead a traditional woman's life appreciated. The fact that women may have had to overcome great obstacles for even moderate success does not put the woman as subject on a par with great men.¹⁶⁰ The biographer must determine how important sex and gender were and convey a balanced view, and readers have strong expectations. Generally they

¹⁵⁶ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: the new biography*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994, p.21

¹⁵⁷ Backscheider, p.151

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

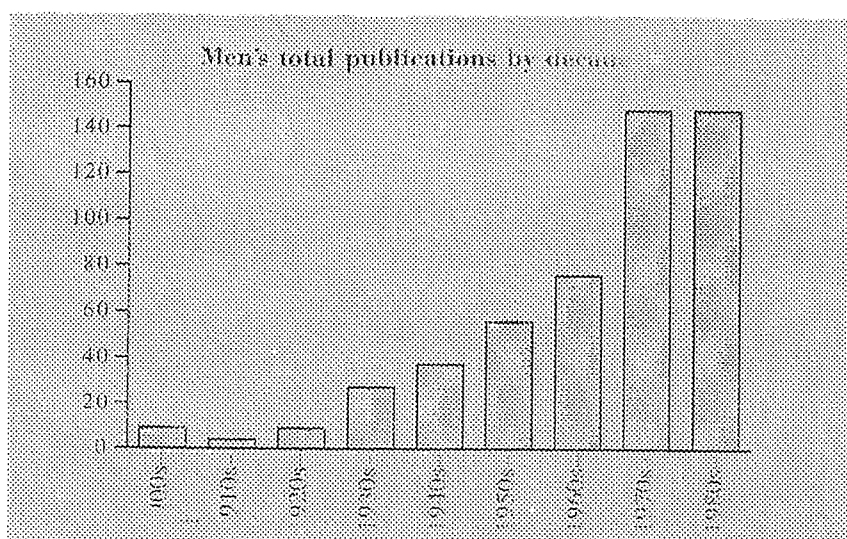
¹⁵⁹ Wagner-Martin, p.5

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

want the woman subject treated as that great individual, but they want her evaluated as a woman and within the standards and expectations they and their culture have for women.¹⁶¹

In New Zealand, formal feminism, the “first wave” of the women’s movement, had been a powerful force between 1885 and 1905. Subsequently, from the 1910s-50s, women’s gains were moderated to some extent, before the next radical feminist groups emerged in 1970 associated with “second wave” feminism which flowered until the 1980s.¹⁶²

Chapman noted, in 1953, that New Zealand was a society with an unusually strict gender definition for men and women, and that our writers had been grappling with this problem.¹⁶³ The period between the two feminist waves had coincided with a time when New Zealand literature was heavily shaped by a masculine tradition. Masculine activities and disclaimers of literary status were two characteristic behaviours of male writers in the 1930s and 40s. One strategy for presenting literature as masculine was, as Jensen notes, to make fun of women and women writers.¹⁶⁴ And he shows that, overall, masculinism severely reduced New Zealand women’s literary publishing in the period 1930-60, and that literature by women recovered slowly from this setback.

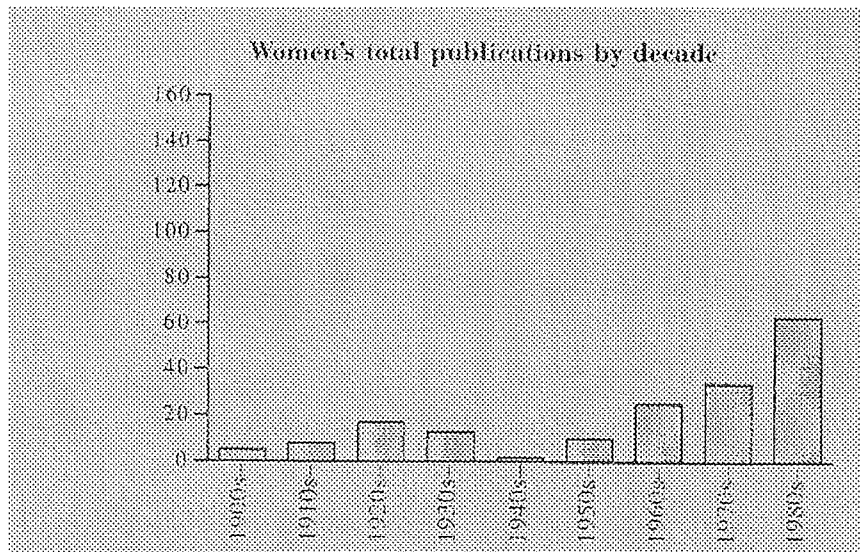


¹⁶¹ Backscheider, p.141

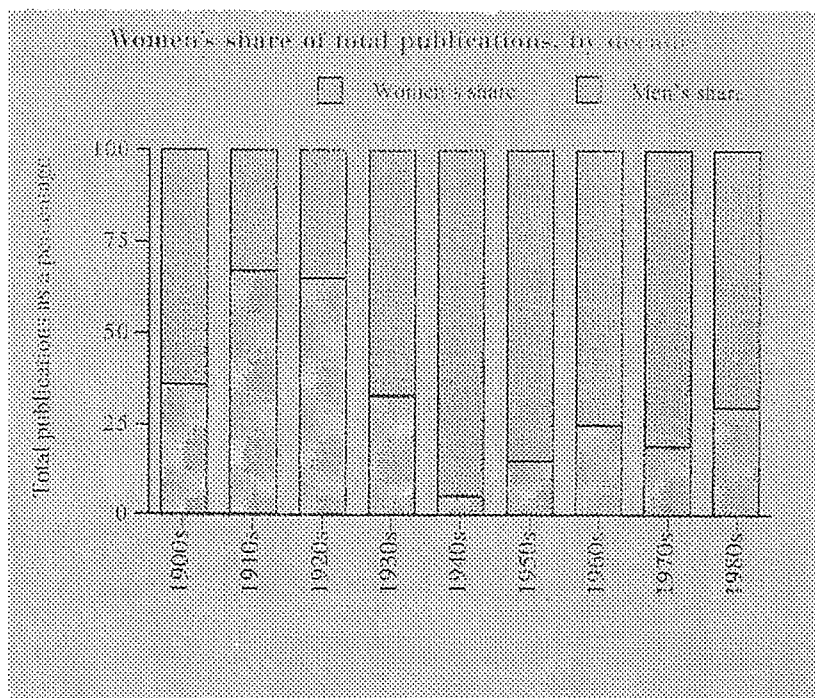
¹⁶² Belich, p.496

¹⁶³ Robert Chapman, 'Fiction and the Social Pattern', *Landfall*, 25, March 1953, pp.26-58

¹⁶⁴ Kai Jensen, *Whole Men: the masculine tradition in New Zealand Literature*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996, p.78



He supports this view with a series of graphs [see above and below] that chart women's publications as a proportion of all publications, in which the withering effect of masculinism becomes quite clear.¹⁶⁵



¹⁶⁵ Jensen, p.100; Jensen takes his figures from the bibliography of *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Terry Sturm (ed.), 1998

Jones concludes that this misogyny and related literary blindness can be explained not only by literary politics (the predominance of writing by women in the previous literary generation, and the support of it by conservative male literary editors), but also by the dynamics of the puritan family pattern against which all of the writers were in revolt, and by the strategies adopted by male writers to make writing appear a more acceptable male activity in an anti-intellectual masculinist culture.¹⁶⁶ This culture began to decline in the 1950s and 60s, one sign of which, as Jensen shows, was that a few women writers began to attain or regain prominence.

In New Zealand, from the 1970s, women began to be written into this nation's history. Previously they had been relegated to an occasional reference - winning the vote in 1893, or entering the workforce during wartime - as was the case in Keith Sinclair's A History of New Zealand - first published in 1959, revised in 1976, and a fifth edition published in 2000 (although, as it stood for a particular time, no attempt was made then to revise it again). Now they began to be acknowledged as equally as important as men to this historiography. Before they could be included, however, the distinctive lives of women and their unique experiences had to be identified in general terms. Women's biography is of primary importance here because research in women's history has, from the beginning, focused on recovering the lives of individual women. Much of the source material for this history was provided by the important women's non-fiction tradition that was a notable feature of their lives in New Zealand since extensive Pakeha settlement began in the nineteenth century. This material is still being retrieved from newspapers, or transformed from manuscript letters and journals into published form.

All sources reflect the pattern of the society that has generated them. Before women had the right to vote or the right to sit in parliament, for example, there were no women's words to be found in records of parliamentary debates; before women worked as journalists or editors, they had little control over what was included in the daily newspapers; when few women were employed in policy-making positions in government departments or large private organisations, they left little mark in the public records of

¹⁶⁶ Lawrence Jones, Picking Up the Traces, p.427

these institutions.¹⁶⁷ But these are not the only sources from which history can be written. Women, in the early days of settlement, were enthusiastic correspondents. Private letters exchanged between family and friends, the means by which relationships were sustained across great distances, provide an important source of historical evidence. These letters were commonly expressive and detailed in their descriptions, giving rich insights into the world in which the women lived. The Letters of Charlotte Godley (1936)¹⁶⁸ were a revelation when first published; another striking example is the letters of Mary Taylor to Charlotte Bronte and others in England, edited by Joan Stevens in 1972.¹⁶⁹ Pioneering women were also prolific writers of diaries and journals, and keepers of sketchbooks. They were often responsible for compiling and transmitting family history. Even apparently slight documents can assist a researcher in establishing a history for women different from that left by the public record.

Three biographies of women will be considered in this chapter, within the context of those historical changes, to illustrate the evolution of women's biographical writing in New Zealand. The first is Helen M. Simpson's The Women of New Zealand, which cannot strictly be termed a "biography" but is nevertheless an example of women's writing published in the 1940s. One of the centennial surveys, which will be discussed as part of the case study, this was the first historical work to specify a separate and significant past for Pakeha women. Since the 1970s, when feminists brought to light source material that revealed the wide range and depth of subjects and experiences of women in the past, there has been an upsurge in the writing of women's biographies. Two very different biographies from the 1990s will then be considered. The Story of Suzanne Aubert by Jessie Munro, and Wrestling With the Angel: A life of Janet Frame, by Michael King. Neither subject lived a traditional role, married nor had children, and each life and the telling of it is very different. Aubert was a nun, active in the late nineteenth century, vivacious and sociable, living a community life, accountable to the patriarchal church hierarchy. The author of her biography, a woman, scholar and linguist,

¹⁶⁷ Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold and Bridget Williams (eds.), The Book of New Zealand Women/Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd., 1991, p.x

¹⁶⁸ Charlotte Godley, Letters from Early New Zealand, Plymouth [NZ]: Bowering Press, 1936

¹⁶⁹ Joan Stevens (ed.), Mary Taylor, Friend of Charlotte Bronte: letters from New Zealand and elsewhere, Auckland: Auckland University Press; Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1972

lives a century later. Frame, living a solitary, independent life, was a contemporary of the author of her biography, a man, and a fellow writer. Both biographies, in their different ways, highlight the differences between what was possible and acceptable in the 1940s and the progress made in the telling of women's lives by the 1990s.

THE WOMEN OF NEW ZEALAND, Helen M. Simpson, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940

The Women of New Zealand cannot be regarded as a biography, not even as a collection of biographical sketches. It was, however, the first historical work to separate out women's history from male-centred general histories, and serves as a useful comparison to three similar books written in the 1990s which highlight the progress that has been made towards the inclusion of women in the historiography of New Zealand. These collections have become the foundation, and the incentive, for the plethora of biographies of women that were written during the latter decade.

Simpson's work was one of the Surveys commissioned by the Department of Internal Affairs to commemorate the Centennial in 1940. In this survey she maintains the theme of pioneer adulation, characteristic of the other surveys, as she examines the lives and experiences of Pakeha women in New Zealand over the previous one hundred years. According to Hilliard, the subject of Simpson's survey had been contentious; so had the suggested authors.¹⁷⁰ The unionist and writer J.T. Paul commented that all the proposed writers (Simpson, Robin Hyde, Jane Mander, Muriel Ellis, Eileen Duggan) would have different views, "none of them possibly the true picture of the pioneer and homely woman who has, in the gigantic task of helping to build up a young country, regarded work as of more importance than abstractions".¹⁷¹ As it turned out, however, as Hilliard notes, Simpson wrote a book quite consistent with Paul's ideal of the "feminine". While she succeeded in bringing attention to the lives of women, a previously silenced group, she also maintained the Victorian aim of providing exemplary lives, an aim that was, as we shall see, later echoed in those women's biographies of the 1990s that had been influenced by the feminist movement.

The Women of New Zealand looks back to pioneer legends that constructed a "New Zealand" that owed its identity to the labour of building Pakeha society. For women, from every strata of society, this was mostly within the role of helpmeet and breeder of a

¹⁷⁰ Chris Hilliard, 'Stories of becoming', p. 10

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

dynasty within the puritan family pattern. Most of the women, Simpson claims, adapted to this role in the new colony quickly and willingly. The experiences of all women, of course, cannot be generalised in this way. Having arrived in New Zealand, women found themselves in circumstances that varied according to the place in which their husbands, brothers, or parents decided to settle. In no case were these circumstances easy. Yet most, in Simpson's view seem to have been able to regard their troubles lightly and faced any difficulties with stoicism and courage. She bases these highly subjective assumptions on the "spirit" she feels is present in her sources, "one of great cheerfulness, even of enjoyment".¹⁷² The resulting increase in self-respect the author notes as a clue repeatedly found in their letters and journals.¹⁷³ Yet Smith, in her review of Simpson's book, felt that "these pioneering women in their enthusiasm for hard work and their eagerness to prove efficient housewives lost some of their spiritual values that must build a community".¹⁷⁴

A main plank in the platform of the founders of the colony was that it should be "an entire British community... and extension of England with regard to the more refined, attributes of civilization".¹⁷⁵ The energy of the pioneer women, Simpson believes, sprang from this vision of the new country that they felt that they were building and contributed to a certain sense of confidence and continuity. There is evidence, however, that all classes brought with them many of the prejudices and conventions of that more complex Victorian society.¹⁷⁶ Although the power of these social influences was weakened by the circumstances of the new life, social hierarchies and distinctions were kept and established themselves among the earliest settlers, remaining, in Simpson's opinion, "to this day" [1940]. "The trouble began," she notes, "in the first years of settlement when the homesickness, which we surely ought, in this our hundredth year, to have conquered, was natural enough. But the geographical isolation, which might have enabled us to cut

¹⁷² Helen Simpson, *The Women of New Zealand*, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p.63

¹⁷³ Simpson, p.114

¹⁷⁴ Sylvia R. Smith, 'Review' [*Women of New Zealand*], *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, October 1940; 1(2): 142

¹⁷⁵ Simpson, p.115

¹⁷⁶ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003, p.175

free from mere tradition, has in fact made us hold to it only more fiercely".¹⁷⁷

Unfortunately Simpson failed to follow this thread, which may have enabled her to account for the difference between the ideals of the new settlers and the material reality in New Zealand.

Some of the formalities of the old social life were of course introduced. Letters and journals provide an insight into the pleasures of the social round. Because of the general lack of servants, the women of New Zealand had to quickly learn to combine the duties of cook-general with those of hostess. One letter-writer deplored, however, what seemed to her the fact that "the people seem gradually to lose the sense of larger and wider interests; they have little time to keep pace with the general questions of the day, and anything like... intellectual appreciation is very rare".¹⁷⁸ Simpson concurs that it was comprehensible, if deplorable, that "the women's conversation showed mainly an absorption, *which it has hardly yet outgrown* [my italics], in the twin subjects of cooking and household management generally, and the shortage and inefficiency of domestic help".¹⁷⁹ For isolated country homesteads, social life consisted largely in hospitality offered to chance travellers. Again Simpson comments, disapprovingly, that the habit of "turning up unannounced", due initially to difficulties in communication, has persisted.¹⁸⁰

A large proportion of the first New Zealand women came to this country prepared to earn their own living. The demand for servants was so great that most were able to find domestic work of some kind. Simpson makes apparent the exhausting nature of domestic labour for low wages, and that conditions took a long time to improve. And she states that it is only just that we should recognise the part played by "domestics", in early and later days, "as at least as worthy as that of any other women of consideration and praise".¹⁸¹ The rise in wages by the last decade of the nineteenth century represents in part the progress of the colony and the general rising prosperity. It also reflects the steadily increasing diversion of girls and women from domestic service to industry and trade.

¹⁷⁷ Simpson, p.120

¹⁷⁸ Simpson, p.128

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Simpson, p.135

¹⁸¹ Simpson, p. 152

In the final chapter, "Women in Association", Simpson indicates the complex networks operated by women in various organizations. The most influential was the Women's Christian Temperance Union [WCTU], which was founded in 1885, and which spread rapidly throughout the country. The most important work of this organisation was the campaign for women's franchise under the leadership of Kate Sheppard, Superintendent of the Union's franchise department. A great deal of the work that lay behind the social legislation of the years since the granting of the franchise in 1893 was also initiated by the WCTU, and its unanimity and persistence in resolutions had their effect upon the governments' statutes book.¹⁸² It also gave rise to several other associations of women throughout New Zealand whose aims were to educate women in their responsibilities, and to secure for them their rights. By cataloguing these developments, Simpson succeeds in highlighting the extent to which women's position in the community was strengthened in the early years of the twentieth century. Most of the book, however, concentrates on the early generations of settlement, and she gives relatively small space to experiences in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, she examines contemporary occupations and emphasizes the range of work performed by women, adding that the statistics, however, do not reveal the degree of opposition against which women may have had to struggle to gain entrance to these various careers, nor how great the discouragement.¹⁸³

After the first excitement of effort and achievement in gaining the vote, women's enthusiasm inevitably lapsed to a certain extent. Moreover, the immediate necessity was no longer so obvious. As a result, Simpson notes, "prejudices still exist [1940] which handicap women when they set out to claim the measure of equality won for them". And she claims that that is largely the fault of the women themselves who "for whatever causes, have not been quick nor urgent enough to take advantage of the position secured".¹⁸⁴ The lives of the pioneers had been vital and energetic, and from the eagerness with which women shared in the work of those days it would have been

¹⁸² Simpson, p.170

¹⁸³ Simpson, p.163

¹⁸⁴ Simpson, p.176

expected that their part in New Zealand history would have been considerable. Yet it is clear from the last sections of the book, which deal with more recent years, that women became neither forceful nor vocal in the community. Although women's organisations increased in strength and numbers, more women gained employment in factories, trade and professions, and a number distinguished themselves as writers and painters or in lives of service to the community, as a whole, the forty years that followed the vote, Simpson feels was a period of marking time.

Simpson's book was constructed around the premise that women participated fully in colonization. In making her case, she went beyond the title to depict colonial life in general terms, and then showed how women were involved as colonial "helpmeets".¹⁸⁵ The task was by no means straightforward. As Simpson explains in the preface, "the story of the women of New Zealand, especially in the early years, is largely the story of the men of New Zealand",¹⁸⁶ and she saw it as her initial task to set apart, both in her selection of material and in its presentation, the particular strands of women's history from the general development of New Zealand affairs. One particular disadvantage that she encountered was the lack of records other than those written by men. Although the early chapters of her book may appear to contain little specific reference to women and their lives and occupations, as distinct from men and theirs, she reminds the reader that they have been written from a woman's point of view and so the emphases are different. She therefore advises that it is necessary to read the book as she has written it, with "imaginative sympathy".¹⁸⁷ There is an almost complete suppression of names, as the author felt that she should write, not of particular women, but collectively, of *the* women of New Zealand. She feared that if she had named the many hundreds of women who had settled here in the early years, even if she could have done so, the survey "would have become merely a series of lists, and still justice would not have been served".¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ The term used by James Busby in the 1830s; 'The Colonial Helpmeet', Women in History: essays on European women in New Zealand, Barbara Brooks, Charlotte Macdonald, Margaret Tennant (eds.), Wellington: Allen and Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1986

¹⁸⁶ Simpson, p. vii

¹⁸⁷ Simpson, p. viii

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

In an appendix at the end of the book, Simpson notes, and evaluates, “some of” her sources, from published books to unpublished letters, diaries and journals, as well as contemporaries’ observations, out of which she has reconstructed the lives of these early pioneers. Simpson was writing at a time when “women’s history” as a discipline had not emerged, and, while the volume is remarkable for its depth and range of original research and readable and lively style, the range of sources is only a fraction of those unearthed in the national archives by subsequent authors who edited later collections in the 1990s, suggesting that she had neither the expectations, nor the skills, to delve any further at the time. Yet Simpson’s book, as Hilliard claims, is worthy of note because it combined the values and subject-matter of family historians with what her editors regarded as academic standards. (Simpson had a PhD in English from the University of London.¹⁸⁹ She also wrote literary and educational articles for the Christchurch Press, and for new cultural and intellectual periodicals such as Art in New Zealand and the left-wing publication Tomorrow, to which she contributed one piece.¹⁹⁰) Her quotations from manuscript sources may have been more accurate than those in “unprofessional” books, but, according to Hilliard, the Centennial staff did not check them. In effect, he adds, Simpson was taking a subject dear to non-university historians and writing a more orderly and temperate account of it without questioning their assumptions about the cultural significance of the subject.¹⁹¹

Simpson’s approach to writing The Women of New Zealand is highly subjective. Full of praise for the pioneer women of the nineteenth century, she is critical of those of the twentieth century who did not build on the foundations laid by the earlier generation. She fails to investigate why this happened. So controversial a topic was perhaps hardly within the scope of the survey that was planned to be narrative rather than analytical, and popular rather than inclusive. The book remains the first insight into the lives of the women of early New Zealand, a base for further research and analysis, and an incentive to build on in the writing of women’s biographies.

¹⁸⁹ Hilliard, ‘Stories of Becoming’, p. 10

¹⁹⁰ Bronwyn Labrum, ‘Helen M. Simpson’, The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol. 5, p. 475

¹⁹¹ Hilliard, ‘Stories of Becoming’, p. 10

Three similar compilations concerning the lives of New Zealand women were published in the 1990s. Unlike its predecessor, The Book of New Zealand Women/Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa,¹⁹² published in 1991, records the lives of some three hundred *named* women, both Maori and Pakeha, in dictionary format, written by two hundred contributing authors. The aim of the collection was not only to provide an alternative to traditional male oriented histories but also to challenge the criteria that have previously determined inclusion in those histories, and to emphasise "the variety of courses that women's lives have taken".¹⁹³ Furthermore, Macdonald explained, "we believed that it would be some time before primary research was sufficiently advanced to support a detailed survey of the history of women in New Zealand, but we felt that biographical investigation had gone a lot further and was one way of putting together some sort of overall picture".¹⁹⁴

A range of source materials has been used: published and unpublished material from archival collections, informal personal records, written and oral, medical and police records. Most of the contributors here have not only succeeded in bringing their subjects to life, but have also provided sufficient material to enable the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps. Those entries where oral sources have been used are particularly effective. Perhaps it is that "memory", Waldron suggests, "as it moves through chains of association, merging the significant event with the minute detail, approximates more closely to the mix of visible and hidden, public and private which constitutes a life".¹⁹⁵ What is clearly shown by this collection is that alongside the broader divisions of class and race, variables such as marital status, sexual orientation, number of children and countless other differences of personality, circumstance, talent and fortune, are all factors which must be considered in the shaping of a life.¹⁹⁶ This makes the writing of women's biography a more complicated exercise than that of their male counterparts.

¹⁹² Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold, Bridget Williams (eds.), The Book of New Zealand Women, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1991

¹⁹³ Macdonald, Penfold, Williams, p.viii

¹⁹⁴ Charlotte Macdonald, 'Making The Book of New Zealand Women', in conversation with Bill Renwick, Stout Centre Review, January 1991:10

¹⁹⁵ Bridget Waldron, [Review], Women's Studies Journal, March 1992; 8(1): 120

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

The most striking thing about the book is the variety of those lives. Despite certain patterns that can be detected, the range of experiences means that generalisations, like Simpson's, cannot be made, the book revealing as much about the diverse elements and changing conditions in which women have lived. Again, in contrast to Simpson's book, one thing that is very apparent in looking at those women whose activities cover the inter-war years, is that the 1920s and 1930s, far from being a "quiet time" for women, were times in which there was a considerable amount of political activism in which women became engaged in existing political and professional organisations. This book, therefore, succeeds in pushing forward the frontiers of feminist research in New Zealand by unearthing the records of such a variety of women's experiences.

One of the books published in 1993, to commemorate the centennial of Women's Suffrage, Standing in the Sunshine: A History of New Zealand Women Since They Won the Vote¹⁹⁷ was the most highly publicised book to come out of the Suffrage Year and, with its associated television series, it was certainly the most ambitious. Based on the numerous life stories of individual women, it offered, according to its cover, "a new way of looking at the place of women in New Zealand society since those dramatic days in 1893". Its scope therefore extends well beyond that of The Women of New Zealand, published more than fifty years earlier. The book consists of a combination of thematic and biographical writing, by thirty-five contributing authors and several other collaborators, in order to highlight "the enormous changes" in women's lives over the previous one hundred years.¹⁹⁸ Theses, research papers and special projects, not all of them academic, provided much of the foundation. Topics and personalities previously well covered were omitted so that fresh material could be presented. Certain types of activity are absent altogether. For example, little attention is paid to the major role played by religion in women's social lives and the church groups and various voluntary organisations into which they gave so much of their time and energy, and through which they received sustenance.¹⁹⁹ This is one instance in which it is apparent that the women's

¹⁹⁷ Sandra Coney (ed.), Standing in the Sunshine: A History of New Zealand Women Since They Won the Vote, Auckland: Viking/Penguin, 1993

¹⁹⁸ Coney, p.10

¹⁹⁹ Barbara Brookes, 'Review' [Standing in the Sunshine], New Zealand Books, March 1994; 3(4):16

lives have been viewed through the eyes of the 1990s rather than from the perspective of the times in which they lived, religion being of less importance to those writers, apparently, than it was to their subjects. Yet the book achieves its goal of being celebratory and entertaining, and offers an accessible entry to the study of women's history and biography.

The third book from the 1990s is "My Hand Will Write What My Heart Dictates": The unsettled lives of women in nineteenth century New Zealand as revealed to sisters, family and friends,²⁰⁰ edited by Frances Porter and Charlotte Macdonald with Tui Macdonald. The book comprises more than five hundred pages of primary source documents, spanning a century from the early 1800s to the early 1900s, relating to women's lives in colonial New Zealand. The documents include letters, diary and journal entries, Maori waiata, official government documents and occasional newspaper reports. It is therefore a significant recuperative project. Macdonald found that the record was very uneven. The relative disadvantage women suffer in the documentation in comparison to men, she claims, makes the task of writing women's history and biography more difficult. Unlike Simpson, the editors were aware of the risks of generalising about the experiences of all women when there were great differences in situation and outlook. Finally the editors were also aware of the perspectives that they, as late twentieth century interpreters, brought to their work.

The overall theme of this collection is one of "unsettlement", which, according to the editors, "suggests something more multi-faceted, more ambiguous, more variable, than the traditional historical depiction of life in nineteenth century New Zealand".²⁰¹

Kroetsch notes that, as a way of telling history, through the lives of individual women, what they are attempting here is "to understand how gender, class, rank and ethnicity operate *together* in specific historical situations".²⁰² The majority of the material has been collected from middle-class Pakeha women who had the advantages of literacy. Maori

²⁰⁰ Frances Porter, Charlotte Macdonald, Tui Macdonald (eds.), "My Hand Will Write What My Heart Dictates": the unsettled lives of women in nineteenth century New Zealand as revealed to sisters, family and friends, Auckland: Auckland University Press, with Bridget Williams Books, 1996

²⁰¹ Porter, Macdonald and Macdonald, p.7

²⁰² Laura Kroetsch, 'Review' [My Hand Will Write], Landfall, Spring 1996; 192:326

women, coming from an oral culture, were less literate so relatively few Maori letters were attainable. Working class women, as well, were not only less literate than middle class women but probably had less time and energy to write even if they could. An attempt to remedy the imbalance between the literate and less-literate, to some extent, by the use of government records, court transcripts and public registers, is distorted by the fact that these documents are written by men, and are couched in depersonalised official language. The contrast between the numerous excerpts, together with the frequent element of surprise, serves better to help balance the collection, and makes it both comprehensive and readable.

While the diversity of the material is a testimony to the multiplicity of women's experiences and attitudes, Kroetsch feels that many of the extracts are tantalisingly short and she wonders from what larger documents the excerpts were taken, what the documents meant then and mean now.²⁰³ The editors acknowledge this problem and urge moving beyond the exhausting collection and selection of documents, to engage in deeper synthesis and interpretation. This offers an opportunity to biographers. It has been suggested that a sense of immediacy and fascination in women's lives and experiences, demonstrated in collections such as these, may give the biographer's voice new energy.²⁰⁴ Meanwhile, these four volumes form a sound foundation for further study and analysis of women's history which provides the context for the future of women's biographical writing in New Zealand.

²⁰³ Kroetsch, 'Review' [My Hand Will Write], p.327

²⁰⁴ Backscheider, p.159

THE STORY OF SUZANNE AUBERT, Jessie Munro, Auckland: Auckland University Press with Bridget Williams Books, 1996

Women as subjects of biographies, not considered in the 1940s, were, by the 1990s, receiving far more attention, both in recovering the lives of significant women in the past, and acknowledging those in the present. One of these women whose life-story was recovered was Suzanne Aubert. In 1945, Patrick Lawlor, in his booklet, A Mother of Compassion: Mother Aubert and her Great Work,²⁰⁵ written for distribution within the Catholic community, had noted that, at the time of her death in 1926, Mother Mary Aubert had been described, by the editor of a secular daily paper, as "New Zealand's Greatest Woman"²⁰⁶. "Nobody will deny", he added "that the description stands today, stronger than ever. When the full life of Mother Aubert comes to be written, there are some who claim that she will be revealed as one of the world's great women".²⁰⁷ Despite these sentiments, however, although her extraordinary contribution, as a woman, to New Zealand society was widely recognised in her lifetime, little was written about Suzanne Aubert. It took until the 1990s for this task to be undertaken. As Jessie Munro explains, "For whatever reason, after her death the memory of Suzanne Aubert began to be presented safely in pious, self-perpetuating and mostly unquestioned legend, or else was quietly effaced".²⁰⁸ In this biography, Munro sought to rectify that situation.

Marie Henriette Suzanne Aubert (known first as Suzanne Aubert and later in religious life as Mary Joseph Aubert) was born near Lyon, France, in 1835. According to Munro's biography, Aubert was to identify several childhood incidents that influenced her eventual choice of vocation. Her enduring sympathy for the incurably ill, the disabled, the deformed, she attributed to a serious accident she had experienced as a young girl. Her family's association with the Marist priesthood in Lyon, and with a number of missionary movements, introduced her to the idea of work in the mission field. Finally, under the spiritual guidance of the Curé of Ars, a visionary who gave her a series of predictions

²⁰⁵ Patrick Lawlor, A Mother of Compassion: Mother Aubert and her Great Work, Wellington: Catholic Writers' Movement, 1945, p.1

²⁰⁶ Paul Kavanagh, The Advocate Press, Melbourne, 1927, quoted in Lawlor, p.1

²⁰⁷ Lawlor, p.1

²⁰⁸ Jessie Munro, The Story of Suzanne Aubert, Auckland: Auckland University Press with Bridget Williams Books, 1996, p.397

about her future life, her decision to enter the religious life was confirmed. As a consequence, in 1860, at the age of twenty-five, without the knowledge or approval of her family, she sailed to New Zealand, one of a group of missionaries to Maori recruited by Bishop Pompallier on his visit to Europe. During the voyage he taught them the elements of the Maori language and culture, necessary, he believed, to better understand them.

Suzanne Aubert's work began in Auckland running an orphanage-boarding school for Maori girls. When Pompallier left New Zealand, however, his successor, who saw Aubert as too liberal in her practices, closed it down, ordered Suzanne to cease wearing her religious habit and return to France. She refused. Later, in 1871, she was invited to join the Marist Mission in Hawke's Bay as a lay teacher, catechist and nurse. By now a fluent speaker of the Maori language, she wrote a Maori prayer book and grammar, and became interested in Maori herbal remedies that she later marketed to raise funds for her work. In 1883, she was transferred to Jerusalem, on the Whanganui River, where she established schools for Maori and founded New Zealand's first indigenous order of nuns, the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, whose lifestyle she designed to suit New Zealand conditions. This was an active, rather than contemplative order, visible in the community, characterised by adaptability and sensitivity to local needs, with an emphasis on hard manual work. While at Jerusalem, Suzanne began to care for unwanted Pakeha children as well as Maori, which led to another phase of her life. She moved to Wellington in 1899 and there became dedicated to social work among the urban poor.

By the 1890s, alongside a growing pride in nationhood, New Zealand had begun to experience the social problems of an industrialising and urbanising society, widening Aubert's concerns. In 1891, the country's new Liberal government proposed to make changes in social justice and social welfare, and Suzanne took advantage of their "bricks and mortar" approach to provide institutional care for the elderly, the disabled, sick children and foundlings. Eventually, in 1907, she opened the first of her Homes of Compassion at Island Bay. The Sisters also provided a soup kitchen for casual and unemployed workers in the city, and a day nursery for working mothers, an innovation at

the time. Although both of these met vital social needs, no funding was available for them, and the Sisters depended upon donations from benefactors, and from begging in the city streets. According to Munro, Suzanne's goal was not only to raise money but also to publicise the congregation that she ran, especially among young women.²⁰⁹

The further Aubert moved into the public arena, however, with her large-scale plans and her drive for donations, as Munro found, "the more she was unsettling many of the clergy with her resilience and unorthodox readiness to use initiative".²¹⁰ This resulted in a considerable amount of antagonism towards her work from within the Catholic hierarchy and a refusal to permit the sisters to train and qualify as state-registered nurses, illustrating some of the constraints placed on women of the church at that time.

Threatened by the take-over of her property and works by the Bishop of Wellington, Aubert travelled to Rome, in 1913, to obtain papal approval for her order and her work, which would give her independence from the overpowering and controlling bishops. She was stranded in Rome by the onset of World War I, and was unable to return to Wellington with the coveted Decree of Praise until 1920, where she died six years later at the age of ninety-one. Her funeral, attended by politicians and church leaders of many denominations, was said to have been the largest ever held for a woman in New Zealand.

This book, which describes in great detail the life and work of Suzanne Aubert, makes it clear why she was respected, admired and loved in her lifetime, and why she is considered to be a New Zealand heroine. It has been suggested that she may possibly be canonised (a proposition that Munro stands quite apart from), which would make her New Zealand's first saint. The process of canonisation (for which a biography is a prerequisite) is only in its very early stages and will take many years to come to fruition. Matthews records one of the present Sister's of Compassion belief that "it will happen in the fullness of time, but, funnily enough, it's not a top priority".²¹¹ So why does it matter whether Aubert becomes our first saint? "Because New Zealanders need someone to look

²⁰⁹ Munro, *Aubert*, p.182

²¹⁰ Munro, *Aubert*, p.98

²¹¹ Philip Matthews, 'Missionary Zeal: Jessie Munro put heart and soul into her study of catholic nun Suzanne Aubert', [Review of *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *Listener*, 27 September 1997: 44

up to," say the sisters, "someone who knew hardship, and loved everyone equally and cared for those at the bottom of the heap; and, perhaps most appropriately of all for a twenty-first-century saint, someone who never claimed to have all the answers."²¹²

At the Montana New Zealand Book Awards in 1997, The Story of Suzanne Aubert was successful in several categories. Best first book of non-fiction, winner of the Cultural Heritage category, and overall Book of the Year, it quickly rose to the top of the best-seller lists, a most unusual position for a work of New Zealand history or biography. It had been commissioned by the Sisters of Compassion, who had chosen Munro because of her fluency in French and Italian, and was published with the assistance of the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. The author was given total freedom to present the life of their founder as near as possible as it had been lived. Despite her obvious empathy with her subject, she did not allow the work to degenerate into hagiography as other, briefer reviews of her life had done (such as Patrick Rafter's Never Let Go! The Remarkable Story of Mother Aubert,²¹³ an educational survey of the life and influence of Aubert in the field of Maori education and in the development of social services in New Zealand). The author aimed at an accurate interpretation of Aubert's life, around which inevitably, myths and legends had arisen, some of Suzanne's own making. It is a long and scholarly study characterised by a meticulous approach to historical detail and balanced research that illustrates how far women's biographical writing had come since the 1940s.

Munro's thorough grasp of French and Italian, enabled her to access vital information in both France and Rome, and to place the French nun more completely within national and denominational frameworks. Suzanne had burnt all her personal papers before she left for Rome, but Munro was able to trace, as far as possible, Aubert's upbringing in France and the influences on her of the land of her birth. The context of French women's religious commitment with the resurgence of Marianism in mid-nineteenth century France, partly a

²¹² Linda Boniface, 'Nun believed in love for all,' [Review of The Story of Suzanne Aubert], The Press, June 16 2004, A16

²¹³ Patrick Rafter, Never Let Go! The Remarkable Story of Mother Aubert, Wellington: A.H and A.W. Reed, 1972

result of revolution conditions, and the rise of the sisterhoods with their emphasis on action and mission is also explored. The sisters' aim, as Munro states, "was to live out a spirit of support and compassion, of involvement and identification with others... and quietly heal divisions and unite people".²¹⁴ This spirit was central to Aubert's life and to her activities in New Zealand. Her presence here, and that of other French orders, is then explained, together with the way her essential Frenchness sometimes created tensions in the progressive Irishness of New Zealand Catholicism. Within this context, the reader comes to understand the personal and spiritual influences that moulded Aubert and created her particular brand of spirituality, with its emphasis on self-denial, simplicity of life-style and hard work. At the same time, the book adds a fresh perspective on the development of the Catholic Church in New Zealand, with all its internal rivalry.

Munro has constructed her narrative and made her judgements based on this source material, and has deliberately viewed her subject from a wide perspective within the context of contemporary French and New Zealand history. "To have had a narrower focus and lesser momentum", she has said, "would have been untrue to the very person the book was portraying".²¹⁵ And, she concludes, to be fair to the nature of the woman, any story about her would need to reflect the history of the people and the country to which she was actively and intensely committed.²¹⁶ Munro provides a lively sense of the changing political and social realities of the period 1860-1926 in New Zealand, including historical figures both great and small, with whom Aubert interacted. An early part of that period, the Vogel era, was crucial to New Zealand's social and cultural development, for in the years 1870-85 occurred nearly thirty per cent of the net immigration of 1860-1950.²¹⁷ The immigrants, however, brought problems with them, such as disease and alcohol, as well as contributing to the severance of the Maori social fabric. Aubert felt that it was the Europeans' responsibility to relieve the sufferings that they caused. Therefore, she devoted the first forty years of her mission to Maori, providing them with both physical and spiritual healing. She found that the best way for her to channel good

²¹⁴ Munro, *Aubert*, p.42

²¹⁵ Jessie Munro, 'Agents of Understanding', *Archifacts*, April 1999; p.17

²¹⁶ Munro, *Aubert*, p.403

²¹⁷ Munro, *Aubert*, p.127

will and acceptance for Catholicism was to be available, helpful, medically skilful, friendly and popular.²¹⁸ These ideals were to be pursued within the context of the fierce sectarian rivalries of the time.

Engel describes Aubert as “a prophetic ecumenicist in an age of denominational bigotry, [embracing] the language and the culture of the tangata whenua at a time of culturally destructive Christian evangelism and attempted political assimilation”.²¹⁹ Yet, as Reid notes, at the same time “her path was very traditional, very conservative, very Catholic. It was this certainty that gave her the freedom for all the practical work that she accomplished”.²²⁰ She crossed divides and built bridges, between lay people and clergy, between men and women, in order to soothe the uneasy relationship between church and state in the development of social services. According to Munro, her convictions and personality were so strong that, on her way, she also lay down the foundation of her future work by inspiring and motivating the people she met.²²¹ The Home of Compassion was a monument to her ability to appeal to the community to fund the provision of medical services for those whom other institutions would not take. It is as the founder of the Sisters of Compassion that she has had her most lasting influence.

Having the utmost respect for Aubert’s work, Munro has tried to be objective about her subject while still remaining passionate. There is no hint of sentimentality and contentious issues are not avoided. Her interest in Suzanne Aubert was never centred on Catholicism, fittingly because Aubert’s work was non-sectarian. Instead, as Munro explained to Decker, she found Aubert not only relevant to her own life, but in a wider sense as well, to the development of a national spirituality.²²² Aubert’s ability to adapt to a multi-denominational environment was indicative of the progress being made towards a distinctively New Zealand variety of Christianity. Munro found Aubert’s story “really

²¹⁸ Munro, *Aubert*, p.124

²¹⁹ Pauline Engel, ‘Review’ [*The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *Women’s Studies Journal*, Autumn 1997; 13(1): 147-149

²²⁰ Nicholas Reid, ‘No better New Zealander’, [Review of *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *New Zealand Books*, March 1997: 7(1):1, 17

²²¹ Munro, *Aubert*, p.182

²²² Dianna Decker, ‘Debutante’s no-fuss, winning style’, [Review of *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *The Evening Post*, 26 July 1997: 10

important in the story of who we are and what we feel we'd like to believe in, what we think we've developed as a national ethos".²²³ New Zealanders express spirituality, she believes, "through a diffusion of friendliness". And she thinks that Suzanne Aubert exemplified that, was a catalyst for it at a time when New Zealand was forming a national psyche. She wanted to tell her story as a huge saga, not just as an academic record, and she had to tell it "in a way that it became important in our whole society, our whole culture".²²⁴ In doing so, as Michael King notes, the subject is revealed as both a product of her time and ahead of her time.²²⁵ A fluent Maori speaker with an appreciation of Maori tanga, knowledgeable about holistic and homeopathic medicine, she could also be identified as an early feminist who clashed with male authority figures. As Bates points out, her return from Rome with the precious approval document for her order really was a body blow to the then New Zealand male Catholic establishment.²²⁶ The degree of independence she achieved at that time was remarkable.

Aubert emerges in history as a startlingly contemporary figure as Munro claims that the life story of this late nineteenth century nun also has relevance to us in New Zealand today. How? Matthews suggests that perhaps because this country seems to be replaying out, once again, the late nineteenth century narrative that Suzanne Aubert lived through, only in reverse. "She witnessed the movement from a form of frontier chaos towards social cohesion; she worked in advance of the social welfare network that New Zealand is gradually dismantling". Thus, he believes, this biography could be read as a warning, "a report from the coalface of charity, speaking of the difficulties of caring for the infirm, the ageing, the poor, without public institutions".²²⁷ Each period, after all, shapes its own biographical questions and needs. As Munro has said: "If the book had been written in New Zealand's cosy 1950s or 60s, it would not have had the same impact, because, in a sense, the message that she was giving about people being equal, and understanding other people, and tolerance, has a practical value now – as well as the themes of poverty and

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Val Aldridge, 'The Write Stuff', [Review of *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *The Dominion*, 26 July 1997:20

²²⁵ Michael King, 'New Zealand Heroine: Suzanne Aubert has a biography that matches her phenomenal life' [Review of, *Listener*, 9 November 1996: 46

²²⁶ Arthur Bates, 'Book Review' [*The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *Whanganui River Chronicle*, 1997: 3

²²⁷ Matthews, p.45

sharing, and equity issues".²²⁸ Aubert emerges as a woman who not only had a seemingly endless capacity for loving waifs and strays, but whose vision of a tolerant, egalitarian, bicultural New Zealand made her a social revolutionary.²²⁹

The biography, however, has been criticised for being too long, too detailed, too concerned with presenting all the evidence. Burnard also notes that the detail, which often tends to overwhelm the subject, is presented almost entirely from Aubert's perspective, so that the reader sometimes loses sight of how her life fits into the larger patterns of New Zealand history.²³⁰ Munro offers no apology for this. She claims that it had to do with scale and relevance. Details passed over as insignificant in other accounts, she came to see as essential ingredients of narrative and theme in Suzanne Aubert's story. It was designed to be accessible in its parts as well as its whole.²³¹

Munro's biography of Suzanne Aubert is feminist insofar as its purpose was to recover a woman whose cultural contributions had been effaced, and to situate her life within the constraints she faced as a woman. Her aim was to get beyond the myths surrounding her subject, in order to achieve an accurate interpretation of her life, as much as evidence allowed. In the process, she offers an insight into the times in which Aubert lived and the individuals and institutions who influenced, helped and hindered her, into the work of the Catholic missions in New Zealand, into the women's orders, and into the history of charitable work among the poor and dispossessed. It seemed that she was not only recovering the life of a forgotten woman but also the didactic purpose of traditional biography as well.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Boniface, A16

²³⁰ Trevor Burnard, 'Pioneer nun saved from the shadows' [Review of *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*], *The Dominion*, 1 March 1997, p.20

²³¹ Munro, 'Agents of Understanding', p.17

WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL: a life of Janet Frame, Michael King, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2000

Modernist literary biography, by definition, focuses on individuals who possessed great talent or even genius as writers; then it normally (except for post-modernist literary criticism) attempts to understand the nature of the individual's achievement and the circumstances surrounding it.²³² Often it is constructed by intercepting the sense of a personality with quotes from their writings to give an essence of character, while also providing insight into the context in which the subject's works were written. It may, or may not, include literary criticism.

Wrestling With the Angel is the biography of New Zealand's most celebrated author, and is one of two studies in this thesis in which the biographers have dealt with a living subject. Janet Frame's writing career spanned more than fifty years. She published twelve novels, four short story collections, a collection of poetry and three volumes of autobiography. Her work is in print in English and in fifteen foreign languages, and is recognised as having the qualities of both originality and greatness. Harvard librarian and critic John Beston has called her "the most distinguished woman writer in English";²³³ the biographer Michael Holroyd described her three volumes of autobiography as "one of the greatest autobiographies written this century";²³⁴ Nobel Laureate Patrick White said that Frame's fiction made him feel "that I have always been a couple of steps from where I wanted to get to in my own writing".²³⁵ Frame herself was considered to be a potential Nobel Prize recipient and was one of six writers short-listed for the Literature prize in 1998 and 2000. She was awarded the inaugural Prime Minister's Literary Award for achievement (alongside Michael King) in 2003. Yet, despite – or because of – this reputation, Frame was one of the most reclusive of authors, her reticence causing her to decline almost all requests for interviews and public appearances.

²³² Peter Nagourney, 'The Basic assumptions of Literary Biography', *Biography*, vol.1 no.2, 1978, p.100

²³³ quoted in Michael King, Tread Softly For You Tread on My Life: New and Collected Writings, Auckland: Cape Catley, 2001, p.16

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

Frame felt that much that had been written about her had been misinformed and her work misinterpreted, and this had prejudiced her against critical biographies in general.²³⁶ It was partly in defence of her position that she had written her autobiography. It was also a factor in agreeing to co-operate with Michael King in the writing of this biography. She did, however, express two preferences that King outlined in the Author's Note: that it not be a critical biography (an analysis of her writing); and that King's interviews with her were not to be quoted verbatim. Deacon found these strange requests from someone whose writings were her life,²³⁷ and, indeed, later Frame denied making these restrictions. Nevertheless, King complied with both "requests".

There are both advantages and disadvantages in writing the biography of a living person. King explained in his essay "Biography and Compassionate Truth", the difference in approach that is required:

One aims at what writer and publisher Christine Cole Catley has called 'compassionate truth': a presentation of evidence and conclusions that fulfil the major objectives of biography, but without the revelation of information that would involve the living subject in unwarranted embarrassment, loss of face, emotional or physical pain, or a nervous or psychiatric collapse. Although the biographer may feel at times restrained and restricted by such an arrangement, the compensations from a literary and scholarly viewpoint almost always outweigh the disadvantages.²³⁸

In this case, there was also a natural empathy between them (this was King's strength), and Frame clearly believed that King could be relied upon to carry out her wishes. He proves to be discriminating yet even-handed in his treatment of her as a person, and is above all respectful towards her as an author whom he held in high regard. He then strives to view his subject objectively, being concerned more with facts than with feelings, and includes letters and reviews of her work by others. He does not, however, offer any opinion or guidance of his own, and leaves many questions unanswered. He implies that the limitations Frame placed upon his work were offset by the fact that she was there to confirm the portrait's accuracy, the most effective way to ensure

²³⁶ Michael King, *Wrestling With the Angel: a life of Janet Frame*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 2000, p.420

²³⁷ Desley Deacon, 'Triumph of the Imagination' [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *Women's Review of Books*, June 2001;18(9):17

²³⁸ King, *Tread Softly*, p.16

authenticity. It is on these terms that Wrestling with the Angel succeeds. It is a non-judgemental, comprehensive account of what Frame was doing *as well as* being creative, thinking of herself first and always as a writer. As such it acts as a complement to her autobiographies, reveals how others saw her beyond how she saw herself, and how the struggles that she endured were perceived.

King has used as one of his major sources Frame's autobiographies. She decided to write them because, as she emphasised in a radio interview, it gave her an opportunity to have *her* say. "I wanted to write my story, and... to correct some of the things which had been taken as fact and are not fact. My fiction is genuine fiction... [This] is the first time I've written the *true* story".²³⁹ King, however, comments on the risk that she took, that these autobiographies, and the subsequent film based on them, "provided new texts on which commentators, whose ranks included some would-be biographers, could base speculations on her motives, on whether or not she had been truthful, on whether she was intent on concealing as much as she revealed and on the supposed relationship between her life and art".²⁴⁰ Yet his own work is on a continuum with those same autobiographies and as such constitutes fresh material for deconstruction. As Cronin maintains, "there is [also] something disconcerting in the notion of a biography that seamlessly interweaves large extracts from the subject's autobiographies with its own copy without a self-conscious commentary."²⁴¹ In one sense autobiographies are always true because they represent a personality. Underlying most is the search for self-identity. Autobiography is, after all, a referential art. Eakin argues, however, that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but evolving content in the intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and that the self at the centre of all autobiography is necessarily a fictive structure."²⁴² King, therefore, uses the autobiographical evidence with a certain caution, since other evidence makes clear that not everything in them is "true", that there has been some manipulation of historical "fact". We are made aware of Frame's art in constructing her life story ("I

²³⁹ King, Angel, p.453

²⁴⁰ King, Angel, p.511

²⁴¹ Jan Cronin, 'Book Review' [Wrestling with the Angel], Kotare, November 2000; 3(2): 94-96

²⁴² P.J. Eakin, Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.3

scheme more than you realize", she told Money in 1945).²⁴³ And in her autobiography she maintains that: "I had learned to be a citizen of Mirror City [the imagination]. My only qualification for continuing this autobiography is that although I have used, invented, mixed, remodelled, changed, added, subtracted from all experiences, I have never written directly of my own life and feelings".²⁴⁴ We only know as much as she allows us to, while King is limited to *her* account of her experience of life. Holroyd maintains that the literary biographer must use, but may rearrange, the subject's experiences, sometimes making heard what is unspoken or showing what has been hidden. But he may not go outside this pact.²⁴⁵ King allows us to see with some clarity, in this biography, no more than the extent of contrivance in the autobiographies.

Frame's request that the author not quote from their interviews means that access to her voice is limited to extracts from the autobiographies that he has used for illustration. King enlarges on events already covered, and there is a fuller view than her own account of her relationships with her friends and mentors. The autobiographies, however, finish in 1963, and it is perhaps because of this that the earlier, vivid picture that she presented of herself, conveyed with a sense of drama using fictional techniques, gradually loses colour. Wilkins notes that Frame's language is alive to a degree that King's is not, and goes further to suggest that biography can reduce the potency of a life.²⁴⁶ Certainly, because of the restrictions placed on this biography, it lacks the drama that would add vitality. Nevertheless, as Jones points out, King succeeds in conveying the details of her life, and in a sense the book's factuality liberates the autobiographies, so one can return to them, admire their form, their style, their internal expressiveness, and not mine them for facts that are not always there. But, that does not mean that King's book is merely a repository. "It has its own narrative shape and momentum, its own cumulative impact, its own sympathetic interpretation of a life. It is relatively more objective than subjective,

²⁴³ quoted in King, *Angel*, p.66

²⁴⁴ Frame, *Janet Frame: An Autobiography*, Auckland: Random Century, 1989, p.405

²⁴⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, vol. 1, London: Chatto and Windus, 1988, p.4

²⁴⁶ Damien Wilkins, 'In the Lock-up' [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *Landfall*, Autumn 2001; 201: 28

more conceptual and less experiential, more literal and less metaphorical, more contextual, closer to history than to imaginative writing".²⁴⁷

King's biography confronts the issue that concerned much of the critical response to Frame's writing, and which also motivated Frame to defend herself. This is the issue of insanity, and the struggle that Frame had for recognition that her reputation for mental illness was never warranted. King guides us, with admirable balance, through Frame's years in and out of psychiatric institutions. He relies heavily here on a variety of sources, including clinical notes, admission reports, and Frame's own correspondence, rather than her recollections, because as he says: "Janet does not simply remember, she relives. She found it almost impossible, for example, to talk about her time in hospital and the ECT she underwent."²⁴⁸ The clinical notes, particularly from the two sympathetic and enlightened psychiatrists, John Money and Robert Cawley, who feature strongly in her life, revealed that they, unlike others, recognised both her pain and her extraordinary talent.

King allows us to see behind the defence system that Frame erected against the intrusive interest in her life. What Frame was most alarmed by were those literary critics who went so far as to suggest that her creative ability was in some way related to her medical history. Blowers observes that King begins to sound like her advocate when he adds, drawing on a radio interview with Frame in 1970: "She simply could not understand why people who were interested in her writing had also to be interested in her life, and in particular want to relate one to the other..."²⁴⁹ On the other hand, Cronin comments that to see this as blatant manipulation seems deeply unfair. Surely Frame had, in her view, a right to publicly "set the record straight" with regard to her sanity – that this requires the maintenance of an aura of objectivity does not necessarily render the account any less valid. More than anything it seems, to Cronin, that the problem here is a general

²⁴⁷ Lawrence Jones, 'King offers rich mine of Frame facts' [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *Otago Daily Times*, 26 August 2000:H: 4

²⁴⁸ Christopher Moore, 'No Ordinary Life' [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *The Press*, 5 August 2000, Sup.: 5

²⁴⁹ Tonya Blowers, 'Glistening with Freud' [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 May 2001: 12

reluctance to allow the demythologising of Frame – the same readers/critics who demand access to the “true Janet Frame” are determined to keep her shrouded in mystery, genius and madness.²⁵⁰ King’s aim, surely, is to correct this view.

King acknowledges in his subtitle: “*a life of Janet Frame*”, that this is his interpretation of the life and times of the writer, as she requested, not a literary criticism. Despite its larger social and literary context, this is her story, and it is her voice that we hear throughout the book, not his. This must have been eminently satisfying for Frame who felt early on in her career that “in conversation I am bedevilled; in written expression an angel will visit”.²⁵¹ It is with this angel that Frame had to wrestle, and out of that wrestling she had produced such impressive prose. On the other hand, according to Wilkins, King is definitely not a wrestling writer. “His narrative is disconcertingly smooth... what would a biography look like if it didn’t suggest, above all, immense composure and certainty? It would look of course, like fiction... this is why as a form [biography] rarely moves us as fiction does and autobiography can.”²⁵² Yet such is the meticulousness of King’s book that Frame is drawn into a plot that is so disordered and so extraordinary that it constantly resembled fiction. What King has accomplished, according to Fusco, is “writing full of reporting and reflecting in absolute empathy with his subject’s talking, thinking and writing, her special and several senses of reality, her response to the demands of others, and to ‘paved solitude’, her coping mechanisms and ultimately her hunger, indeed her need, for some sense of peaceful control over her life”.²⁵³

King carefully balances his enquiry with compassion for the subject, and avoids enclosing Frame within some immutable image. He gives us a rounded picture of his subject, but it is not, however, a complete one, and he misses many opportunities to illuminate her unusual life. For instance, he is disappointingly reticent about Frame’s early obsession, and her life-long friendship, with her first therapist John Money, and the influence that he may have had on her rich imaginative life. In the detailing of an

²⁵⁰ Cronin, p. 96

²⁵¹ King, *Angel*, p. 136

²⁵² Wilkins, p. 36

²⁵³ Cassandra Fusco, ‘Reviews’ [*Wrestling with the Angel*], *Takahe*, December 2001; 44: 57-58

itinerant existence, especially in North America, where, as Stead states “she developed her eerie talent for finding protectors and rich sponsors”, Stead began to feel that “there was too much glittering surface and not enough of the pain underneath”.²⁵⁴ As Williams concludes, Frame did not quite give up final control over the way she would be presented to the world.²⁵⁵

The biography may even be perceived as an exercise in discretionary tactics similar to those of Frame herself. Thomson claims that because of the amount of reading between the lines that is necessary, and because of King’s not offering a subjective assessment, the reader is constantly made aware of the biography’s subtext: here too is the biographer’s story, with both the benefits and constraints of writing about a living person.²⁵⁶ The validity of his perceptions hinges on the relationship between autobiography and biography within the text and the status of the two stipulations outlined in the author’s note. What we witness in the autobiographies is the autobiographical act itself, not an historical one nor a faithful reconstruction of her life as in the biography, but one in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness.²⁵⁷ As Cronin states, given that Frame’s life has been subject to misinterpretation by those who have insisted on reading her fiction as autobiography, it seems understandable that the division between history and literary criticism should be imperative.²⁵⁸ Yet as King asserts: “she conveyed a vivid sense that reality itself is a fiction and one’s grasp on it no more than preposterous pretence and pretension”.²⁵⁹ The question now is, as Cronin asks, whether this statement significantly undermines the biography as a whole or whether it contains and hence neutralises the cynical view.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁴ C.K. Stead, ‘A Life of the Mind’ [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *Dominion*, 12 August 2000: 26

²⁵⁵ Mark Williams, ‘Shy writer emerges from behind her wall’ [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *The Evening Post*, 4 August 2000: 5

²⁵⁶ Margie Thomson, ‘Frame of mind’ [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *New Zealand Herald*, 5 August 2000; I: 2

²⁵⁷ Eakin, p.56

²⁵⁸ Cronin, p. 94

²⁵⁹ King, *Angel*, p.518

²⁶⁰ Cronin, p.94

While assuming an objective stance, King occasionally seems to lean in favour of his subject. Negative reviews of her books, for example, although they are disappointing, do not automatically mean the work has been “misrepresented and misunderstood”. And oddly enough for a literary biographer, as Rivers claims, “he seems to resent violations of Frame’s natural but futile desire ‘to prevent speculation that some versions of her novels may have been closer to autobiography than fiction.’”²⁶¹ Wilkins argues that at the core of King’s admired biographical ease lies his own diffidence towards Frame’s work; he moves with confidence through the *life* because the *work* is seen lightly. And he maintains that, a long time ago, “Frame ceased to be a writer and became a cultural ‘effect’ – a marker of something beyond herself... While King restores the everydayness of Frame... my suspicion is that this biography is part of that cultural effect rather than its interrogation”.²⁶² Excessive sympathy with the subject, and concentration on the life of that subject, the circumstances which were conducive to writing and those which were a hindrance, inevitably distorts perspective, and can easily lead to uncritical acceptance of legend. Stead believes that Frame will never be a popular writer, but that she has become, mysteriously and not inappropriately, one of our national icons. “This means”, he says, “that there is always, surrounding any discussion of her life and works, a faintly cloying atmosphere which I find needless and even unpleasant. There are whiffs of this in King’s book”.²⁶³ Could he then be among those New Zealand critics who, according to Stead, “got into the habit of speaking about Frame, not just uncritically, but in hushed and reverent tones, as if we were gathered at her bedside?”²⁶⁴

Nevertheless, this biography is an admirable work of scholarship, impressively detailed in its research and documentation. King wanted to write “an honest record” of the woman who had such an impact on the cultural history of this country. This he achieved, but it is a *Life* that leaves Frame strangely without a body, without substance. Blowers concluded that, in the end, we don’t know her any better; we just know more.²⁶⁵ According to

²⁶¹ Bronwyn Rivers, ‘Keeping the sharks at bay’ [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *The Spectator*, 28 April 2001: 33

²⁶² Wilkins, p. 27

²⁶³ Stead, ‘A Life of the Mind’, p. 26

²⁶⁴ King, *Angel*, p. 514

²⁶⁵ Blowers, p. 12

Watkin, King intended to write a second book on Frame, an addition he said he would only write after her death. It was his duty, he felt, to use tact while she lived, but his duty as a historian to flesh out the story when she died.²⁶⁶ Eliminating any feminist stance, King's final image of this troubled, heroic, endlessly fascinating life is a set piece of compelling understatement. It is of Frame as he saw her at the time of writing, behind locked doors and drawn curtains, in front of her computer. It is as if, O'Sullivan observes, the world "out there" may indeed be real, and may impinge at any moment. But *here* she is in control, where the shape of what her writing tells her is as true as anything else. And she alone decides. The angel reads over her shoulder, now the wrestling is done.²⁶⁷ There is a problem, however, with the image of Frame in that place where, via the Internet, "she rediscovers the world and engages with it, without the burden of social contact."²⁶⁸ This conclusion seems to reinstate the notions that the book is so dedicated to dispelling, and demonstrates the potency of the mythology of Frame. Yet, as Wilkins states, "the cleanness and clarity of King's book, its modest aims and excellent organisation, its judiciousness and its calm are not inconsiderable achievements. Its very presence – a serious scholarly life of a contemporary NZ writer, *this* writer especially – amounts to a force for good in our culture."²⁶⁹

Dennis McEldowney, writing in 1984, stated that: "Questions raised by literary biography – whether biography casts light on the creative process, or is merely voyeurism; whether imaginative writing casts light on the writer's life; whether, if the value of biography is assumed as one means of understanding experience, the biographies of writers is a distinct sub-species – have had hardly any impact in relation to New Zealand writing because so little of it has been practiced".²⁷⁰ King's biography, written during the latter half of the 1990s, requires this statement to be revised. In fact his entire oeuvre demands it.

²⁶⁶ Tim Watkin, 'The people's historian' [re Michael King], *Listener*, April 10 2004: 21

²⁶⁷ Vincent O'Sullivan, 'Better to tell it all' [Review of *Wrestling With the Angel*], *New Zealand Books*, October 2000; 10(4): 1,3

²⁶⁸ Cronin, p. 96

²⁶⁹ Wilkins, p.26

²⁷⁰ Dennis McEldowney, 'Recent Literary Biography', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 1984, No.2, Wellington: Victoria University, Department of English, p.47

CHAPTER FOUR

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

In 1840 Carlyle had claimed that the history of mankind was the history of its great men. But ten years earlier, in his essay "On History" he had offered a more democratic and broadly based conception of history: "Social Life is the aggregate of all the individual man's Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies" [Essays 2:86].²⁷¹ And even as Carlyle was writing, another group of nineteenth century historians and philosophers of history were expressing their view that not only did Great Men *not* make history, neither individuals nor human personality affected history. During the twentieth century the emerging fields of anthropology and sociology increasingly focused attention on societies and social trends. Concepts like culture, social structure, and social processes began to give more weight to groups and typical individuals while downplaying or ignoring eminence.²⁷² Biographers, too, no longer felt that they must deal only with renowned individuals. They recognised that the reason for choosing a subject for a biography could reach beyond that of greatness, and that greatness was not necessarily a criterion for an interesting life. By including this formerly neglected, yet significant human sector, the scope of biographical writing was expanded and enriched.

In the Old World, the acquiescence in inequality had governed the lives of people; in the New World, which included New Zealand, this was replaced by the dream of equality. This idealised "insiders' view", as Fairburn described it, maintained that there was no place nor need for the complex social structures and impediments characteristic of the Old World.²⁷³ The vision of a simple, individualistic, egalitarian society based on

²⁷¹ Fritz Stern (ed.), The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present, London: Macmillan, 1970, p.93

²⁷² Jerome G. Manis, 'Great Little Persons', Biography, 1989; 12(1):18

²⁷³ Miles Fairburn, The Ideal Society and its Enemies, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984

abundance, was however, a fantasy, the reality less than ideal. Nevertheless, the “egalitarian myth” had taken root and developed, helping to bind the nation together and adding to its emerging sense of identity. The myth, based on the fact that frontier conditions at first forced a similar style of life on most people, was further enhanced in the 1890s when New Zealand enacted some important social reforms that resulted in the country becoming known as the social laboratory of the world. Later, after World War I, it became entwined with the Gallipoli legend, associated with a particular male identity, and established itself as part of our traditional culture.²⁷⁴

The decades of the 1930s and 40s in New Zealand, years of Depression and World Wars, the election of the first Labour Government and its introduction of the welfare state, served to re-invigorate the egalitarian tradition and its precepts of equality of condition and equality of opportunity for all.²⁷⁵ The transformation in the fabric of society at this time helped produce a new sense of pride in New Zealand as a nation, and a distinctively New Zealand society began to emerge.²⁷⁶ The 1940 Centennial was an opportunity for celebrating the previous one hundred years of progress and prosperity. A number of important literary and artistic works were commissioned at this time. Their practitioners were third and fourth generation New Zealanders who had developed a strong sense of place. They wished to communicate this feeling of success and there was a large audience for their works.²⁷⁷ Contemporaneous with them was the establishment, in the 1930s, of left-wing cultural organisations, that were influenced by the broadly based political and cultural movement known as the Popular Front which had strong Marxist sympathies. The establishment of the Progressive Publishing Society in 1941 launched a type of cultural nationalism with a socialist slant. The Marxist note in much of the work that the society published, such as Tomorrow magazine, involved criticism of New Zealand's

²⁷⁴ Belich, Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000, Auckland: Allen Lane; the Penguin Press, 2001.

²⁷⁵ Graeme Dunstall, 'The Social Pattern', The Oxford History of New Zealand, G.W. Rice, ed., Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992: 452.

²⁷⁶ Erik Olssen, 'Depression and War (1931-1949)', in The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand, Keith Sinclair, ed., Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1996: 211.

²⁷⁷ Olssen, 'Depression and War', p.229.

cultural establishment, on the grounds that it catered to an elite and not to the people.²⁷⁸ Although these left-wing organisations were soon dismantled, World War II served to reinforce national consciousness as the New Zealand soldiers developed a sense of collective identity and solidarity together with a more intense institutional culture.²⁷⁹

In the forty years after World War II, social policy helped to reshape, but not break up, the structures of equality. From the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s full employment and increasing affluence enhanced the apparent realisation of the ethos of equality. Yet material expectations rose continually, and the welfare state itself bred the problem of inflation.²⁸⁰ With the economic downturn of the late 1960s came doubts and divisions in society, despite the leaders of both political parties continuing to reinforce the egalitarian myth. Meanwhile, in the 1960s and 70s, women became more aware that they were not equal. Realising that they had not made much progress towards the equal status anticipated by the suffragists when they won the vote in 1893, a new women's movement arose to fight for women's rights and their claims for equality.²⁸¹ By the 1990s, however, it had become apparent that, within society as a whole, greater freedom had engendered greater inequality, and with more scope for initiative and enterprise had come greater insecurity, hardship and social tension. New Zealand society may have become more cosmopolitan and more sophisticated, but it was also less egalitarian and less secure.²⁸² Increasing social fragmentation, as it affects many western countries, seems to be accompanied by the increasing popularity of biographies. This may be explained by the fact that late twentieth century people recognise (whether consciously or merely instinctively) the significance of the disparate lives of a wide range of prominent figures to their own.²⁸³

²⁷⁸ Andrew Cutler, 'Intellectual Sprouts: Tomorrow Magazine 1934-1940: A Cultural, Intellectual and Political History', M.A. Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1989, pp.66-67

²⁷⁹ Belich, p.279

²⁸⁰ Dunstall, p.452

²⁸¹ Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, revised edition, Auckland: Penguin, 2000, p.330

²⁸² Jack Vowles, 'New Times (the 1990s)', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Keith Sinclair, ed., Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 375, 389

²⁸³ Alexander, p.91

Part of the egalitarian myth had been the reluctance of New Zealanders to promote the achievements of one person over another. In the last decade of the twentieth century, however, as the gaps widened between the different groups, and in the absence of a common identity, the need seemed to increase for the revival of the idea of the hero, so that the "ordinary" man may take his lead from exemplary individuals. The "great man" extolled now, though, was very different from those heroes of the 1890s or the 1940s. These indigenous heroes were seen as Kiwi icons – humble, egalitarian and free of the Imperial system. In the telling of their lives, biographers strove to present an account of their subjects as "human" rather than "heroic", with both their capabilities and their limitations exposed. Their popular appeal lay in the ability of the writers to represent the ordinary man or woman, and the very complexity of character and diversity of achievements afforded multiple bases for loyalty and identification. The wider range of alternatives for biography, that includes "significant others" and "new heroes", adds to the historiography of this country more comprehensive truths and a richer understanding of the human condition.

The inclusion of subjects from broader segments of the population may be traced by examining three very different biographies of "significant others". A.G. Bagnall, in association with G.C. Petersen, wrote the life story of William Colenso in 1948. Their intention was to produce a more rounded picture of that life than those hitherto written about prominent figures, emphasising in particular the segments that were most significant, and of most interest, to the general public. In 1995, social historian Miles Fairburn published Nearly Out of Heart and Hope: the puzzle of a colonial labourer's diary, a study of James Cox, an itinerant labourer living in New Zealand between 1880 and 1925. It is a rare record of the daily life of a permanent member of the colonial working class whose suggested motivations bring to life the customs, perceptions and character of the colonial period. Finally, Edmund Hillary: the life of a legend, by Pat Booth, published in 1993, presents us with the paradox of a "great man", a non-conformist Kiwi hero of extraordinary accomplishments, who regards himself as an ordinary bloke. By studying these very different lives, and the approaches to the writing of them by the various authors, a change can be seen from the perception of the great man

as hero, through the egalitarian myth, and back again to the hero of a different type with whom the "ordinary" man or woman can conform. This change may prove to be one of the reflectors in the evolution of our cultural identity.

WILLIAM COLENZO: printer, missionary, botanist, explorer, politician: his life and journeys, A.G. Bagnall and G.C. Petersen, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1948

The sense of national consciousness in 1940s New Zealand had been strengthened by the Centennial and by World War II. Underlying this was the egalitarian myth with its principle of equality of status and equal opportunity for all. During this period, writers began to question "importance of the subject" as an absolute criterion for the writing of biography. A wider range of alternatives, some believed, could expand and enrich the scope of biographical knowledge. It is speculation as to why the two authors A.G. Bagnall and G.C. Petersen, quite independently, decided to study the life of William Colenso, but it can be assumed that each was interested in an individual not for his "greatness" but for the considerable contribution he had made to the colonisation of New Zealand.

The lifespan of William Colenso encompassed most of the nineteenth century, sixty-four years of which were spent in New Zealand against the colonial background of Maori and Pakeha conflict and progress. He was born in Cornwall, England, in 1811, the eldest of a large family, and was apprenticed to a printer in St. Ives in 1826. Desperately serious-minded, he was highly religious in a very Protestant evangelical way, attending both Church of England and Wesleyan Methodist services before becoming a registered Church member of the Wesleyan Methodist Society. He began work with the printers to that Society, in London in 1833, who soon sent him to run their small printing press at Paihia, Bay of Islands, New Zealand, where he arrived in December 1834. The first book ever printed in New Zealand was a 16-page translation into Maori of the Epistles of Paul, which Colenso produced in 1835. More ambitious was the production of 5,000 copies of William William's Maori New Testament, the first appearing in 1837. His next major undertaking was 27,000 copies of the Book of Common Prayer in Maori.

These publications came at a critical time for the Christian missions that had made little progress in their first fifteen years in New Zealand. But from 1830 the pace of conversions quickened, as the desire for European goods increased, along with the mana

of the missionaries themselves. Colenso's output attracted great Maori interest and increased the authority and the extent of missionary influence.²⁸⁴ His most memorable work was the printing of the Maori text of the Treaty of Waitangi in February 1840. The missionaries themselves had played a crucial role in the signing of the Treaty. As an eyewitness Colenso reported to the Church Missionary Society what became the main account of the signing of the Treaty, in which he carefully recorded his impressions of the proceedings. He noted that several of the chiefs had placed the matter entirely in the hands of the missionaries.²⁸⁵ With one notable exception, the Roman Catholic Bishop Pompallier who advised his adherents not to sign, the Protestant missionaries urged the Maori to sign the Treaty. Colenso's experiences in the mission field, however, had given him a wide appreciation of Maori problems and, immediately before the signing of the Treaty, he intervened to claim that many Maori were unaware of the meaning of the Treaty, and its implications. But his objections were rebuffed, and no further explanation of the meaning of the Treaty was offered to the Maori. Neither was any further action taken by Colenso, who considered that he had "discharged his duty".²⁸⁶ Although, as his biographers claim, his account has been stated to lack "the essential of historical accuracy", they feel that there is little doubt that Colenso has preserved what may be accepted as a faithful and carefully authenticated record of the events.²⁸⁷

Colenso's religious fervour and energy were linked with the curiosity of the intrepid explorer. As Haast had done in the South Island, Colenso did in the North, becoming one of the foremost New Zealand naturalists. His instinct for collecting went along with an exceptional gift for observation, and his growing enthusiasm for natural history was boosted by a brief visit by Darwin, in 1835, and by Joseph Dalton Hooker in 1841. He began to report his finds regularly to Sir William Hooker at Kew and send specimens off to contribute to John Dalton Hooker's work on the flora of New Zealand. Towards the

²⁸⁴ David Mackay, 'Colenso, William, 1811-1899', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, vol. 2, p.88

²⁸⁵ Tony Simpson, 'Colenso's Scruple: the missionary response to the Treaty of Waitangi', *Political Science*, December 1992; 44(2): 24-41

²⁸⁶ Denis Walker, 'Ideology of Authenticity: William Colenso's narrative of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi', *Landfall*, September 1990; 44(3): 327-336

²⁸⁷ A.G. Bagnall and G.C. Petersen, *William Colenso: printer, missionary, botanist, explorer, politician: his life and journeys*, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1948, p.95

end of his life, in 1866, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in recognition of all the contributions he had made over half a century.

Colenso had had plenty of scope for collecting botanical samples on his many journeys. His zeal to convert, led him to make more ambitious expeditions, and to look for missionary work in remote areas. Bagnall and Petersen studied his letters and journals carefully, and came to the view that he joined with pleasure and interest in the long community talks that took place on the various marae that he visited, where he gained much of his extensive knowledge of the Maori people, their way of thought, folk-lore, traditions and poetry. Eventually, in the authors' opinion, he obtained an understanding of the race rarely attained by a European.²⁸⁸ This was helped by his rapid grasp of the Maori language that had enabled him to carry out missionary services in the villages regularly visited from Paihia. The authors noted from other sources, however, that Colenso had a couple of impediments. He suffered from "nervous stammering" – which he eventually conquered – and had no musical ear. These were serious obstacles to his goal of becoming an ordained missionary, in holding services, preaching, and the necessary singing of hymns.²⁸⁹ Nevertheless, in 1840, Colenso, tired of his task as a printer, applied to Bishop Selwyn, the recently appointed Bishop of New Zealand, to become ordained. With some reluctance, Selwyn finally accepted him as a candidate, provided he obtained a wife to assist him in his missionary work. He soon married the daughter of another missionary, whom he thought would be useful for his intending life-style, although neither partner had any affection for the other. In 1844, the newly ordained deacon travelled south to take over the new Ahuriri mission station in Hawke's Bay, his wife, Elisabeth, to run the mission school. The authors acknowledge that she had the more difficult job. From this base, and with Maori assistance, Colenso made many important journeys across the Ruahine Range that increased both topographical and botanical knowledge. The mission covered a huge area, and he pursued his responsibilities with vigour.

²⁸⁸ Bagnall and Petersen, p.67

²⁸⁹ A.L. Rowse, The Controversial Colensos, Cornwall: Comish Publications, 1989, p.97

While his initial success was impressive, many Maori became offended by Colenso's dogmatism, intolerance and lack of humour, and his impact eventually diminished. Yet, at the same time, he strenuously defended the Maori against what he regarded as encroachment on their rights by the European settlers, and his opposition to Maori land sales earned him the hostility of the growing number in the area. His relationship with fellow missionaries and the Anglican establishment deteriorated as well after 1845. Colenso had begun an affair with a young Maori woman, a member of his household, and a son was born in 1851. As a consequence, he was suspended as deacon and dismissed from the mission. He became a virtual recluse, staying on at Ahuriri, without family (his wife had returned to Auckland with the children), and with few friends.

The authors deal with this stage of his life more briefly than they had his previous years. They claim that, for the next few years, Colenso is temporarily lost. Nothing is known of his activities; he wrote no pamphlets or articles and there were no extant diaries or letters to bridge the gap between this and the next phase of his life. Having no factual evidence to deal with, and determined to keep a critical distance from their subject, they can only speculate about his apparent transfer of interest and loyalties from the Church to public life.²⁹⁰ Their dependence on primary documentation had left them with nothing much to write about. At the age of seventy, however, Colenso had written a fragment of Autobiography to explain himself to his Maori son, with its understandably defensive note. After studying this, his biographers felt they were able to penetrate a little further into the egoistic and fractured life of the Deacon. Dismissed by the Church, he had then prospered and made money from trading and land sales, although that had never been his motive. When, after fifty years, he had examined his conscience, he wrote that he could "safely say that the *only* thing which induced me to leave my country, and family and friends and come to this land – was *to serve God* in the great mission field: *for this alone and for no other purpose.*" When he came to the years of his troubles he came to a mystery he simply could not understand.²⁹¹ His biographers did not believe that it was their job to provide that explanation.

²⁹⁰ Bagnall and Petersen, p.354

²⁹¹ Rowse, p.152

By this time Colenso's attitude toward Maori had changed, as he identified himself with the settlers, and eventually he came to stand for the small farmer, against the big pastoralists who consigned large areas to sheep-runs. Finally, in 1858, he entered provincial politics. Although he was a conscientious member of both the Provincial Council and the General Assembly, he was a failure as a politician. He lacked tact, an ability to listen and a capacity to compromise.²⁹² Increasingly, he turned to writing and botanical work and published a number of scientific papers. In 1865 he was commissioned by the General Assembly to produce a Maori dictionary, but only a section was published before his death. Palmer regards this as a loss, because the stimulus to the recording of the Maori language that might have followed such an event would make easier now the task of creating a historical dictionary of Maori.²⁹³ Much more valuable were the historical pamphlets describing the early years at Paihia, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and his own land explorations. In his final years Colenso was regarded as something of a character, a man who had outlived his adversaries, and he received a tolerance denied him in his more active years.²⁹⁴ In 1894 his suspension as deacon was revoked and he was readmitted to the Anglican clergy. He died at Napier in February 1899, as solitary as ever, "no wife, no child, no relative was there to mourn his passing".²⁹⁵

Bagnall and Petersen knew that, in dealing with a figure such as Colenso, any form of hagiography was inappropriate. Although as a genre biography remains fundamentally subjective, they believed that an "objective" approach was a better way of dealing with their subject, making no judgments about him but writing simply about the facts of his life, uncoloured by feelings or personal opinions. The most significant factor contributing to this goal, they maintained, was thorough research into primary texts. They claimed that without such research it would be difficult to separate the individual from the times

²⁹² Mackay, p.89

²⁹³ Gregory Palmer, 'Good and Cornish', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 February 1990, issue 4531: 120

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Rowse, p.152

unless a series of suppositions and unproven hypotheses were to be put forward.²⁹⁶ Colenso had left a vivid record of his life in New Zealand, from the earliest colonial days until the end of the nineteenth century. Rowse suggests that he took perhaps a more representative part in it – from missionary to politician – than any other figure.²⁹⁷ A prolific writer, many of his journals, letters, pamphlets, articles sent to learned societies, and newspapers, had been included in archival collections. His biographers were conscious however, that their methodology based on these primary documents may reveal aspects of Colenso's life that would be controversial. They therefore placed a subtle disclaimer on the fly-leaf of the book:

*'[Paint me as I am.] Nothing extenuate
nor set down aught in malice'*
(Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act V, Scene 2)

Carraghan notes that this is the correct attitude of the biographer in the face of his subject, a sincere and legitimate attempt to apply the principles of objective history.²⁹⁸

Petersen - lawyer, consul, local politician and historian - had always been fascinated by the story of the settlement of New Zealand. At an early age he began collecting books and papers on the new colony, in particular material on William Colenso. When he discovered that A.G. Bagnall was also working on Colenso, the two co-operated in the writing of this biography. Research and composition were undertaken jointly, Petersen being responsible for Parts 1 and 2, with the Ruahine journeys in the later sections; Bagnall wrote Parts 3, 4 and 5, with botanical commentary in the earlier parts.²⁹⁹ In his review of the book, contemporary writer John Pascoe found it easy to find fault with Petersen's writing – "his style has the conveyancer's tendency to circumlocution" – but noted that his collaborator, Bagnall, was a scholar well-grounded in psychology and in New Zealand history.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ Bagnall & Petersen, p.vii

²⁹⁷ Rowse, p.93

²⁹⁸ Gilbert J. Garraghan, *Guide to Historical Method*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1948: 242

²⁹⁹ Bagnall and Petersen, p.viii

³⁰⁰ John Pascoe, 'A Missionary Explorer' [Review of *William Colenso*], *The Press*, 2 April 1949: 3

Bagnall - librarian, bibliographer and historian – was employed at the Turnbull Library, becoming chief librarian for the last seven years of his working life, retiring in 1973³⁰¹. He also wrote for the socialist Tomorrow magazine, and was one of the founders of the Group Observation Fellowship of New Zealand, an organisation for social research. Alongside his career, he applied himself to a considerable amount of research into New Zealand history. With a profound knowledge of available resources, his historical writing is notable for the amount of detail he was able to incorporate, reflecting the persistence and care with which he worked on primary documentation³⁰². Olssen remembers that in an address to a Summer School in Local History at Massey University in 1972, Bagnall described the attributes of a successful local historian as insight, patience, judgement, accuracy, orderliness, a sense of community, a dispassionate but kindly irreverence, some social maturity³⁰³. These are the qualities that he brought to bear on the writing of this biography.

While collecting information is only the groundwork for any type of historical writing, the skill that Bagnall displayed so abundantly lies in presenting the facts and bringing the past not merely alive but into perspective. Not only did he study the documents, but as a keen tramper and naturalist, he knew the places that he described, as they were at the time of writing, which give his evocative descriptions a sense of immediacy. As Traue points out, Bagnall was also an advocate of the need to master the total historical record of the subject. "He was only too well aware of the heavy burden of primary documentation (and the lack of it) facing the writer of New Zealand history, and laboured prodigiously in his chosen fields to reclaim the substance of history from below the codex line for the printed page".³⁰⁴ Evidence of his thorough research is shown in Bagnall's extensive use of footnotes, one of the first writers to include this amount of detail in a biography.

³⁰¹ Penny Griffith, 'Bagnall, Austin Graham, 1912-1986', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol. 3, p.27

³⁰² W.J. McEldowney, 'Valedictory: Austin Graham Bagnall', New Zealand Libraries, October 1973; 36(6): 349

³⁰³ A.L. Olsson, 'Austin Graham Bagnall, 1912-1986: a tribute', New Zealand Libraries, September 1986; 45(3): 56

³⁰⁴ J.E. Traue, Obituary: Austin Graham Bagnall, New Zealand Journal of History, 1986; 20(1): 207

Williams regards it as an important work, a New Zealand classic, in which, he believes, Bagnall in particular was in total empathy with his subject.³⁰⁵

Keeping a critical distance from their subjects allows biographers more freedom, within their own ethical boundaries, in how their subjects are portrayed. Yet, despite resolute detachment, the authors of this biography show an understanding of their subject that is rare in New Zealand biographical writing in the 1940s. Traditionally, commentators on biographical writing have stressed this empathetic orientation to the "subject" on behalf of the biographer, who nevertheless has an "objective" role as the interpreter and presenter of the finished biography. Pascoe states in his contemporary review, that few New Zealanders have been so objectively treated as Colenso has been in this biography. While the authors have given their subject an exhaustive historical treatment, he says, they have "outflanked the narrow scope of the professional historian and have given rich detail of the many sides of Colenso's life without letting the narrative fall to the irrelevant or the inessential".³⁰⁶ He finds that the study is fair, objective, and sympathetic without being uncritical. If we accept his view, this biography of Colenso is an important precursor to the "tell-all" biographies written in the 1990s. Caplan maintains, however, that "objectivity" is a word no longer used in regard to biography. Each biographer, he claims, out of the huge mass of material before him, chooses that which shores up the image and ideas he already has of his subject.³⁰⁷

The treatment of the source material had presented Bagnall and Petersen with some problems. The great bulk and completeness of the Mission Journals, through which Colenso had kept the Church Missionary Society up to date with the progress of the missions, could simply have been edited. If they had done this, the main emphasis would have been on the religious side of his activities at the expense of other important aspects of his life. A great deal of relevant supplementary matter, both descriptive and botanical, was only published by him in later articles which would have meant omitting the most

³⁰⁵ Nigel Williams, 'Retirement of the Chief Librarian, Austin Graham Bagnall', Turnbull Library Record, October, 1973; 6(2): 36-40

³⁰⁶ Pascoe, 'A Missionary Explorer', p.3

³⁰⁷ Justin Caplan, 'A Culture of Biography', The Literary Biography: problems and solutions, Dale Salwak, ed., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996, p.25

interesting and significant aspects of his explorations. To the authors it seemed that the first duty of a Colenso biographer should be the provision of a balanced and factual picture of his life, with particular emphasis on those sections of most significance and general interest. Certain personal and political matters had to be frankly discussed, which would have been at odds with the sexual and societal scruples and lingering Puritanism of the 1940s. As they explain, such treatment was inescapable from any honest and serious survey, particularly in view of the existence of a tradition of exaggerated misrepresentation.³⁰⁸ This comment amounts to overt criticism of the former "great man" approach to the writing of biography, disillusionment with the idea of the "hero", and a recognition, which they hoped to convey in this study, that others of lesser importance can be of equal significance to the history of the times.

This biography is the story of a life told through close and compassionate observation. It is not, however, simply a life story. It is also a narrative about travel, anthropology and philosophy. As the authors explain, if New Zealand history can still be written without reference to William Colenso, the life of a man who reached distinction not in one but in several fields was surely long overdue. His incursion into so many occupations and studies, the reputation won in some, the notoriety acquired in others, the problems of his character and the interest of his life, which made him a foil to any events and developments in our history are reasons enough.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Caplan, p.25

³⁰⁹ Bagnall and Petersen, p.vii

NEARLY OUT OF HEART AND HOPE: the puzzle of a colonial labourer's diary, Miles Fairburn, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995

This is the story of a man of no consequence, an obscure labourer who emigrated from England to New Zealand in 1880. It is also an enquiry into New Zealand history, and the ways in which a "life" is structured by the "times". In presenting this life story, prominent social historian Miles Fairburn uses an innovative approach, combining the methods of biography with those of social and labour history, cultural and ethnographic history, to explore the life of a type who is usually overlooked, in an attempt to understand his world.

James Cox was born in Wiltshire, England, in 1846, the son of a prosperous small farmer. After his father's death, when he was seventeen, he continued living with his mother until the age of thirty-four, while he worked as a clerical assistant with the Great Western Railway Company. When his mother eventually sold the family farm in 1880, James made the decision to immigrate to New Zealand, possibly out of a desire to prove his independence. He never married, nor did he return home. After his arrival in Christchurch, where he spent the first eight years, he probably worked as a labourer. In 1888, a severe economic depression in Canterbury and a prolonged spell of unemployment eventually forced Cox to move to the North Island in search of work. He soon found employment as a fibre-washer at a flax mill near Himatangi where he worked for the following two years.

With the downturn of the flax prices in 1890 the mill closed and Cox lost his job. He then made a series of bad decisions, which subsequently helped to push him into a life of poverty. A series of temporary jobs, alternating with bouts of illness, and extended holidays, soon found him penniless, finally causing him to take to the road as a tramp. For about a year he wandered aimlessly over the lower half of the North Island, begging for food at sheep stations and picking up odd jobs. The intense insecurity of such a life permanently destroyed his confidence about taking economic risks and occupational initiatives.

Between 1893 and 1902, Cox's fortunes improved after he found employment as a labourer with a small firm of agricultural contractors in Carterton. The work was paid on a purely casual basis, however, and his wages were low and uncertain. With the demise of the contracting business in 1902, Cox was again unemployed. This time he was older, and with less casual work available, he found it difficult to find jobs and to hold them down, even though he was an orderly, industrious and reliable employee. Basing himself in Carterton, he eked out an existence as best he could, always fearful that he would be forced into vagrancy again.

Increasing ill-health and major surgery forced him to retire, in 1918, to Carter Home, Carterton, a well-endowed charitable institution run by a local trust for elderly, indigent men. Here he enjoyed economic security and unaccustomed comfort with few restrictions on his freedom of movement. He died in 1925 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Greytown cemetery, never having enjoyed a life in the "workingman's paradise" that was supposed to be the emigrant's destiny.³¹⁰

This insignificant workingman had, however, produced something that was quite remarkable. Cox had kept a diary, which was found amongst the few belongings left at his death, a diary that he had diligently written up at the end of practically every day of every year that he had lived in New Zealand. It is this diary that is the principal source for Fairburn's meticulous reconstruction of Cox's life, and his enquiry into the circumstances that shaped its course. It is an extraordinary document due to its massive scale and high rate of entries. The comparatively large surviving portion of it is divided into thirty-seven volumes, each representing a calendar year (that for 1894 is missing) for the thirty-eight year period from 1888-1925, an estimated 800,000 words, on average in excess of sixty words a day, recording the great majority of all the days in Cox's life from the age of forty-two to his seventy-ninth year. The diary was kept at a time when so few poor people practised literacy that those from the working classes have come close to being historically inarticulate. For that reason it has unique value. Originally, it had been

³¹⁰ Miles Fairburn, 'Cox, James, 1846-1925', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, v 3, C39, p.123

Fairburn's intention to produce a selective edition of the diary so as to allow Cox "to speak for himself", but "the diffuseness, apparent shapelessness and unremitting concreteness of the diary put this possibility out of contention". Fairburn decided instead to write "an interpretation of Cox's life, something which was more than a biography, a multi-faceted study of Cox's life and times".³¹¹ In the process, he demonstrates how biographical research, and by extension the art of biography itself, may be used for a variety of empirical and theoretical purposes and is applicable to historical research.

Fairburn had first encountered the diary while researching his earlier The Ideal Society and its Enemies.³¹² Recognising the rarity of such a document, and its value to social historians, he carefully read the complete text taking detailed notes. But Fairburn was perplexed by it, not least because Cox's life in some ways fitted his model of the Ideal Society, while in many ways it did not. Nearly Out of Heart and Hope, then, could serve as an important adjunct to The Ideal Society, although Fairburn avoids making any explicit connection. The methodology used in both books, however, is similar. Fairburn explains that standard narrative approaches to biography do have limitations when dealing with an individual life as part of a more general social history. The traditional narrative form, he claims, is not the most useful form with which to make a persuasive case. This biography is designed, therefore, so that it proceeds as a systematic and formalised argument. Here the major threads of the subject's life, instead of being woven together, are carefully teased out and each examined separately. The book is divided into three parts: the life of Cox; the puzzle of his continuing poverty; and an attempt to solve the mystery: why he, as an educated Englishman, emigrated in the first place, why he was unable to improve his position in life, and, with his family still giving some support, why he did not at least move on, or return to England. Seeking an answer to that puzzle, Fairburn refers to various sociological and historical theories, puts forward several hypotheses, and, in a similar fashion to The Ideal Society, rejects them.

³¹¹ Miles Fairburn, Nearly Out Of Heart and Hope: the puzzle of a colonial labourer's diary, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995, p. vii

³¹² Miles Fairburn, The Ideal Society and Its Enemies: the foundations of modern New Zealand Society 1850-1900, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984

The book begins with a biographical section which reconstructs in rich detail the life of Cox, focusing on his character, the key events in his life and his responses to them. It was paramount that this base of life and times, as far as it could be ascertained, was first established, before any analysis or hypothesis could be applied. The aim of this section is to follow his slide into poverty and to describe how it affected him in the colonial context. The main theme is the way in which his way of life was influenced by uncertainties, mostly adverse material realities, over which he had little control. Fairburn explains that he, as the author, has used a particular device to modify the story. He divides Cox's life story, for convenience, into seven chapters, each corresponding to a definite stage of his life. This gives the impression that Cox himself had a clear idea that his past possessed this pattern, which he evidently did not.³¹³ The other two parts of the book are more analytical. As Fairburn explains, they take particular issues that are implicit in the life story and examine them in depth within the framework of a series of historical genres. "These parts of the book reconstruct and connect Cox's worlds of material realities, of meaning, of social interaction, and of psychological adjustment and survival".³¹⁴ In doing so, Fairburn establishes a puzzle that stands at the heart of the diary, and then gradually resolves it in order to finally present *the most likely* explanation of his subject's life.

If Fairburn has used his primary source, the diary, to define Cox's place in society, Cox himself had seen society defined by his place in it. He belonged to a long tradition of self-accounting diarists, whose object was "to keep a kind of time and motion study by which the individual records and judges his output day by day" and then makes appropriate corrections to his conduct.³¹⁵ One uncommon purpose, for Cox, though, was that as he grew older, it played a crucial part in helping him cope with increasing personal stress. Fairburn found that the sense of order that permeates the text, and the richness of its observation on "the crude fabric of everyday life in a new society", acts as a foil to the inexorable struggle recorded by Cox against the perils of contingency as he slid to the

³¹³ Fairburn, *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*, p.23

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Fairburn, *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*, p.4

very bottom of the social ladder.³¹⁶ The diary's greatest value to the biographer and historian is its immense store of concrete information about the minutiae of Cox's everyday life. Recording those facts was also of value to Cox. "The absoluteness, the certainty, the incontrovertible nature, the authority of factual knowledge gratified his sense of order";³¹⁷ gave him a sense of security, and served to bolster his confidence and self-esteem.

As a source of data for a biography, however, the diary has problems and limitations. In general, a diary or journal derives its chief merit as an historical source from the circumstance that, at least in theory, it is a record of personal experiences and external happenings made on the same day on which they occurred. The contemporaneity of the diarist's record goes a long way towards guaranteeing its accuracy. On the other hand, the distinctly personal character of the diary or journal renders it peculiarly liable to a subjectivism that is at cross-purposes with the simple truth.³¹⁸ Yet, given a competent and conscientious diarist such as Cox, and having the type of character he had, there is no reason why his product should not measure up to the requirements of accurate, objective record. His type of factual or objective diary, however, can be self-revealing only indirectly as it eschews in the main any expression of personal thought and feeling, and records for the most part only external happenings.

Another problem for Fairburn concerned the ability to do justice to the abundance of data in the diary. He suggests a number of approaches: focusing on Cox as an individual and using the diary to write a biography in the traditional way; or even a psycho-history of him through "a study of the origin and manifestations of his inner, hidden and contradictory impulses"; or instead, some aspect of his external environment could be chosen. But any one chosen genre, Fairburn believed, would be too narrow and restrictive, and would lead us to neglect other dimensions of the diary.³¹⁹ Thus, he suggests if we had focused on writing a traditional biography of Cox, "we may learn

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Fairburn, *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*, p. 11

³¹⁸ Garraghan, p. 248

³¹⁹ Fairburn, *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*, p. 20

about his life history, about the key events in his life and their cumulative effect upon him as a person. But we would have little scope (unless we ruptured the flow of the story) to talk about the wider context in which he operated, the structures underlying the key events in his life: his worlds of work, social interaction, material realities, and meaning". And, if a book had been written that was a collection of a number of different genres, it would lack coherence and unity.³²⁰ This, of course, is not necessarily the case. Cultural biography, as Reynolds argues, is based on the concept that "human beings have a dynamic, dialogic relationship to various aspects of their historical surroundings, such as politics, society, art, literature, music, science, religion, and so on", and that it is the special province of the cultural biographer to explore this relationship. Cultural biography illuminates not only the subject's life but also national history.³²¹ The potential danger of using a subject's life to explore history, however, is that the subject can get lost in the process. Fairburn has not allowed this happen. In constructing his puzzle and the hypothetical solution, his subject is kept in the forefront of the analysis. It is on this level that the book succeeds as biography. Yet it is the socio-historical aspect that the author is ultimately interested in. It is apparent to Olssen that Nearly Out of Heart and Hope consciously operates at two levels, the methodological one and the historical one. He felt, as he did on reading The Ideal Society, that the author was as interested in the *method* of historical enquiry, especially in social history, as he was in what he considers the "puzzle" of Cox's life.³²²

In the next part Fairburn discusses the "puzzle" of the title, the apparent discrepancy between Cox's "wretched existence" as a poor labourer and his consistently strong beliefs about the efficacy of self-help. What puzzles Fairburn about Cox is the apparent failure of his subject to acknowledge the blatant contradiction between these two worlds, the world of his material realities and the world of ideology. He then makes a comparison between Cox's world and that of the 1990s, and infers that Cox "responded to the contradiction in a very different way we would – he treated the apparent glaring

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ David S. Reynolds, 'Cultural Biography: Reflection, Transcendence, and Impact', Biography and Source Studies, vol. 7, 2003, p. 85-86

³²² Eric Olssen, 'Self-reliant in Victorian New Zealand' [Review of Nearly Out of Heart and Hope], New Zealand Books, December 1995; 5(5): 16

discrepancy between promise and performance with silence".³²³ This, which was obviously acceptable behaviour to Cox, in Fairburn's view, makes him an enigma – "in essence, what is puzzling about him is that he did not think the gap between belief and actuality was puzzling".³²⁴ Fairburn is employing his imagination here to justify the use of his subject's life as a means of enquiry into the social history of the times.

In trying to explain the puzzle, Fairburn takes a particular approach to ethnohistory that studies the way ordinary people make sense of the world. By choosing this approach, he is using social-historian Robert Darnton's technique of trawling through his key source with an increasingly fine net, and his injunction to historians to look for the most puzzling aspect of a document in order to capture the "otherness" of the past.³²⁵ By employing Darnton's methods, Fairburn proceeds by moving through a variety of genres to explore systematically what is most puzzling about the diary. It is the construction of this central puzzle (which exists in Fairburn's mind if not in Cox's) that provides the book's momentum. In the process of employing this "hypothetico-deductive" technique he sets up possible explanations for Cox's behaviour, systematically develops a number of plausible hypotheses and then rigorously subjects each to analysis.

Having rejected the possibility that Cox was suffering from some mental disorder, he proposes another, more sociological, explanation: that Cox was deeply conditioned in self-help dogma by his society. This theory is impossible to verify directly, which means that we must rely on circumstantial evidence, by asking if the theory is consistent with other things we know about Cox. There is an abundance of such evidence, but also some fundamental problems. Despite his abject poverty, Cox, according to Fairburn's close reading of the diary, clung to a set of curiously inappropriate Victorian beliefs, and lived his life according to the ideology of self-help such as that espoused by one Samuel Smiles. Burnard maintains, however, that Cox's whole life suggests the opposite. He exhibits little concern with self-interest except beyond survival, and thus did not express

³²³ Fairburn, *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*, p.182

³²⁴ Fairburn, *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*, p.119

³²⁵ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, New York, 1985, pp. 4

dismay when he failed to live up to any Smilesian ideal.³²⁶ But surely, Burnard's criticisms lead us towards Fairburn's own conclusion that Cox's belief in such ideology was a means by which he could exert control over reality. Fairburn's solution to the puzzle is that self-improvement contained both moral and material imperatives; indeed, diary-writing itself allowed Cox to believe in the morality of self-improvement, despite his own material failure; the effort needed for the production of the diary nurtured essentially the same attributes as the self-help virtues.

The "puzzle" of the diary, the massive contradiction between the self-help ideology and the reality of miserable poverty endured by Cox, Burnard feels, however, is an uninteresting historical question. And in trying to solve this puzzle, Fairburn goes beyond what evidence he has to make some entirely speculative suggestions that Burnard finds very problematic.³²⁷ Olssen points out that it was Cox's psychological rigidity that made him vulnerable to the volatility of the colonial labour market, a fact that Fairburn notes but fails to appreciate its significance. The final resolution is not entirely satisfactory to Olssen either, as the artifice is finally confessed. The claim, that Cox wanted material success and only subscribed to Smilesian values in order to achieve success, is declared an assumption and quickly proven to be a false one. There has been no paradox, after all, and Olssen finds the artifice too transparent, the deception unnecessary.³²⁸

In setting out to account for the contradiction between Cox's obvious good qualities and his poor conditions, Fairburn explains the paradox in two ways, one of which Burnard finds convincing, the other of which he does not. There were a number of material reasons for Cox's poverty. First, he had the misfortune to move to New Zealand in a time of depression where his skills as a clerk were not needed and where he was forced to become a labourer and part of a workforce that was most vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations. Second, being a labourer in the countryside entailed dependence on employers who themselves faced considerable fluctuations in their own economic fortunes and were hopelessly ill-prepared to cope with economic misfortune. Having read

³²⁶ Trevor Burnard, 'Review' [*Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*], *History Now*, May 1996; 2(1): 54

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Olssen, 'Self-Reliant in Victorian New Zealand', p.17

Fairburn's account of Cox's life and times, Burnard then expected him to relate what he had found out about Cox to his previous statements, in The Ideal Society, about atomisation within nineteenth century New Zealand society. "Cox", says Burnard, "a man alone if ever there was one, fits almost perfectly within Fairburn's well-known interpretation of colonial New Zealand pakeha society".³²⁹ But does he? In The Ideal Society, Fairburn was describing typicalities. And Cox was not typical. As an emigrant labourer, Cox was relatively old when he arrived in New Zealand, he was unskilled, and he did not invest in land or show any entrepreneurial skills. So instead of moving from Cox outwards to society in general, because Cox was not typical of that society, Fairburn turns inwards, to an examination of Cox's mind and behaviour.

Grover suggests that if there is a paradox, it might rather be that it is in the man rather than in his diary keeping, a suggestion that is more in keeping with standard biography than with social history. An explanation that he thinks is worth considering is that in mid-life, this "insignificant, faceless, non-descript nonentity" resolved he would no longer be responsible to anybody else other than to behave decently and honourably. It seems that here we have a man who was willing to trade off material security however poverty-stricken he might get from time to time, for freedom from commitments other than moral. When such individuals do practise a commitment, Grover claims, it is often a private one, such as a diary. There, in its perfectly cut and folded pages, neat and compact handwriting, and regular entries, was Cox's ordered universe, his "mastery of reality", his compensation for a life of baffling and stressful hardship.³³⁰ As Brooking notes, Fairburn finally settles on a complex sociological explanation which puts Cox's failure down to an interplay of hard economic structures, internalised ideologies, inappropriate coping mechanisms and plain bad luck. He asserts that the diary became a medium through which he cultivated virtue and expressed his powers of agency. Like moral self-growth, diary making was attainable since it was in his direct control. Cox, Fairburn concludes, turned diary making into a symbol of his concept of self-help as a moral imperative. And,

³²⁹ Burnard, 'Review' [Nearly Out of Heart and Hope], p.54

³³⁰ Ray Grover, 'Private Commitment' [Review of Nearly Out of Heart and Hope], Quote. Unquote, June 1996: 30

in Martin's view, in making this statement available to us, Fairburn not only fascinates the reader, but gives that assertion greater power.³³¹

This, of course, is only one reading. In Kroetsch's opinion, Fairburn has spent a baffling amount of time explaining theories that don't apply, although this is explained by his rather questionable methodological assumption that "the elimination of all these hypotheses suggests that those that remain must, unless better possibilities can be found, lie closer to the truth". She adds:

Fair enough, unless of course we are able to suggest a better possibility – a possibility that literary critics of diary writing have been suggesting for some time. If we suppose a diary is a written artefact that can be read as a text, the answer to the puzzle of Cox's diary may be found in the writing itself, the one aspect of the diary Fairburn seems loath to consider. The omission of Cox as writer is ultimately [the book's] most significant flaw, one that other scholars must eventually address.³³²

Bongiorno also considers that Fairburn's exploration of ideology, and Cox's symbolic world, raise difficult methodological problems that are not fully explored in the book. He wonders just how much of a man's understanding of the world and emotional and spiritual life are likely to be represented even in an 800,000-word diary when it is composed for particular purposes, such as "self-accounting" and helping its author to cope with "personal stress". Fairburn does, he notes, refer to some of the diary's silences, but perhaps a little more recognition of the diary's limitations and closures might have enhanced this otherwise impressive study.³³³ Martin, on the other hand, believes that Fairburn's technique of probing and asking hard questions functions admirably to highlight all sorts of aspects that might otherwise be passed by.³³⁴ And King notes that, in his reconstruction of Cox's thoughts and activities, and deft analysis of their significant features, Fairburn succeeds in giving his subject's life that one marvellous quality which

³³¹ John E. Martin, 'The colonial underbelly' [Review of *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*], *Evening Post*, 27 Oct 1995, p.5

³³² Laura Kroetsch, 'Peeps at History' [Review of *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*], *Listener*, 25 Nov 1995, p.59

³³³ Frank Bongiorno, 'Books' [Review of *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*], *Australian Historical Studies*, April 1997, 108: 147-148

³³⁴ Martin, p.5

his diary alone lacked: interest.³³⁵ Olssen, however, thinks that the diary might be more fruitfully opened to a variety of readings, because such a text might provide a range of suggestions, a prompt to further speculation at precisely this important intersection between public and private which Fairburn has identified and explored. As it is, and this is his central complaint, the Fairburnian method precludes such open-ended approaches.³³⁶

Fairburn's approach to the writing of biography is an innovative and successful attempt to combine several genres, drawing on a large historiography and body of theoretical literature in his quest to understand the world of James Cox. It is the eclecticism of his approach that is one of this book's strengths. What is most impressive, too, is the way in which Fairburn remains focused on the relationship between writing and the material reality of work and poverty. As Taylor reminds us, the diary was not simply a record of events, nor was it a text that can be easily decoded to reveal a narrative version of self and society. Rather, this diary was a literary means of self-emancipation, the need for which only becomes evident as a result of the careful social history that Fairburn undertakes.³³⁷ Ultimately, the book's interest lies in the way Cox is used as a means of investigating a culture rather than its specific verdict on Cox's failure. Even if we conclude that Cox was not typical, no future account of colonial society can ignore him. He assumes an importance that he never had in his own lifetime. While standard biographies typically end with the subject's death, cultural biography, such as this, recognises that in many cases death is just the start of a person's real significance.³³⁸ As Olssen points out, those things that make Cox's motives impenetrable, including those resounding silences, constantly remind us that the late Victorians were not like us, that they remain as a closed book, different, other. That, surely, is the final puzzle.³³⁹

³³⁵ Michael King, 'Labourer's life' [Review of *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*], *Metro*, Oct 1995; 172: 121-124

³³⁶ Olssen, 'Self-reliant in Victorian New Zealand', p.17

³³⁷ Miles Taylor, 'Book Review' [Review of *Nearly Out of Heart and Hope*], *Political Science*, Jan 1997; 48(2) 233-235

³³⁸ Reynolds, p.94

³³⁹ Olssen, 'Self-reliant in Victorian New Zealand', p.17

EDMUND HILLARY: The Life of a Legend, Pat Booth, Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1993

Part of the egalitarian myth had been the reluctance of New Zealanders to promote the achievements of one person over another. Over the last half of the twentieth century, however, as the gaps widened between different groups in society, and in the absence of a common identity, the need seemed to increase for the revival of the idea of the hero, so that the "ordinary" man, or woman, may take his or her lead from exemplary individuals. The "great man" extolled in the 1990s, though, was very different from those heroes of the 1890s or the 1940s. In the telling of their lives, biographers strove to present their subjects as "human" rather than "heroic", and their popular appeal lay in the ability of the writers to represent everyman or everywoman.

The fortieth anniversary of the conquest of Mount Everest, in 1993, triggered an avalanche of books concerning the mountain and the men who have conquered it. Up until this time, no biography of the first man to reach the summit, Sir Edmund Hillary, had been published. Edmund Hillary: the life of a legend, by Pat Booth, was the first, which also became the basis for a television documentary. The preface, with its thanks to Hillary, gives an impression that this is an authorised biography written with the co-operation of its subject. King notes, however, that "To date, Hillary, as is his right, has shown no inclination to co-operate with a biographer. Consequently, there are still major elements of his life that have to remain a source of conjecture."³⁴⁰ Although it is not a full and rounded account of its subject life, the book does succeed as a timely sketch in celebration of the life of a contemporary New Zealand hero.

The popular image of Sir Edmund Hillary is that of the archetypal, almost mythic Kiwi hero of awesome accomplishments. But, on the surface at least, he is not a hero in the British tradition, because he insists that he is not one. His desire is to remain just an ordinary bloke, and, it seems, it is the way Kiwis want their heroes to be. Despite being

³⁴⁰ Michael King, 'Past Imperfect,' [Review of Edmund Hillary: the life of a legend], Metro, March 1994; 153:121-122

the first man to scale the world's highest mountain in 1953, for which he received a knighthood, he has always insisted that he is a man of "very modest abilities."³⁴¹ Yet one of the reasons that he is honoured and admired is because he has, over the intervening years, built on that first major adventure with a series of others, as he quickly recognised the usefulness of his celebrity status in the pursuit of further challenges. Far more worthwhile and enduring to him, however, was the establishment of the Sherpa development charity, the Himalayan Trust, through which he was able to repay his debt of fame to the Himalayas by inaugurating a programme of building schools, clinics, airstrips and bridges in Nepal.

King notes that the remarkable thing about Hillary is that "he became famous completely by accident." He agrees with Hillary's mountaineering friend George Lowe, that Hillary was the right man, possibly the only man, in the right place at the right time, and knew what to do when he found himself there.³⁴² Then, as King points out, "he used that accidental fame to do marvellous things. He didn't use his reputation to make a living. He exhibits and promotes the best of New Zealand values and virtues... He represents these things in a way New Zealanders like – modest, bluff and laconic."³⁴³ Yet, as Ansley claims, "he fits, defines, overflows, every category for hero. He is famous, he has done the glorious deed, he has done others almost as outstanding, he is modest to a fault, he has made a huge contribution to this country and Nepal, he perseveres, is courageous, friendly, not up himself, a good Kiwi joker. He walks with kings (and queens) and keeps the common touch."³⁴⁴ While the traditional concept of "hero" endures, the definition has changed over time, and in the New Zealand context. Hillary has not changed – he still holds the same values that he has always had, regarding them as normal and everyday, but many others regard those values with admiration and amazement. He remains our society's most admired person, because he is the personification of those values that we most respect in the late twentieth-early twenty-first century: ruggedness, no nonsense, pragmatic, uncomplaining stoicism and strength, understatement, and modesty.

³⁴¹ Edmund Hillary, *View From the Summit*, London: Corgi, 2000, p.11

³⁴² Booth, *Edmund Hillary: life of a legend*, p.7

³⁴³ Michael King, 'Hillary', *Evening Post*, 12 June 1999, p.7

³⁴⁴ Bruce Ansley, 'The last action hero' [Review of *Edmund Hillary*], *Listener*, 31 May 2003, p.30

Hillary has himself published two volumes of autobiography, the first in 1975.³⁴⁵ This was followed by an up-dated and revised version, in 1999, in which he chose different emphases, and in which he displays a combination of perspective and confidence that had been lacking in the earlier work.³⁴⁶ He has also written or co-authored nine other books about his adventures. As well as these, there have been countless media articles about him and his activities, with the result that he has led one of the most thoroughly documented lives of any New Zealander alive or dead. This must be of significant value to any biographer, even though he or she would have to work with a powerfully received image of the subject already unconsciously formed from the mass of previous work.³⁴⁷ The author of his first biography, Pat Booth, is an experienced writer, journalist and former sub-editor of the Auckland Star newspaper. The book is highly readable and lavishly illustrated. Booth's crisp, vivid prose illustrates well heroic, colourful, even sensational material. There is a difference, however, between a book written by someone who is fundamentally a journalist and someone who is fundamentally a biographical writer. And while autobiographies report from the inside looking out, journalists report from the outside looking in. Biographers need to consider both perspectives to enable an understanding of an individual and his response to social circumstances.

This book consists of a series of vignettes, in roughly chronological order, describing episodes, events, and anecdotes, already familiar to most people, together with brief yet coherent portraits of others in Hillary's life, drawing out the most evocative or dramatic slant on the issues in the most efficient way. Booth had available as his major source only Hillary's first autobiography, and quotes extensively from it. Hillary's second autobiography reveals, in fact, that some of Booth's observations are inaccurate and misleading. It is interesting to compare Booth's style with that of Hillary who makes no effort to make a drama out of dramatic achievements but describes his adventures with delightful understatement, honest and clear, orthodox, but a bit flat. An autobiography, of course, is the story a person chooses to tell about the life that he has lived, what is

³⁴⁵ Edmund Hillary, Nothing Venture, Nothing Win, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975

³⁴⁶ John Henzell, 'Hillary takes a fresh look' [Review of Edmund Hillary], The Press, 3 July 1999; Sup.13

³⁴⁷ Holmes, Footsteps, p.135

remembered of it, how he saw things at the time and what he wants others to know of it. To use this as a basis for a biography is not sufficient to allow for an assessment of character and motivation. The only new material that Booth introduces is the inclusion of himself and his own personal experiences that he shared with Hillary.

As Booth explains in his own autobiography, his interest in Hillary began in June 1953, when every column in the Star, it seemed, was already committed to saturation coverage of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The young reporter was then handed a bulletin from Reuters that told the totally unexpected – an unknown Aucklander, Edmund Hillary, and a Sherpa called Tenzing, had climbed Mt Everest. Booth's assignment was to go and tell Hillary's parents the good news. As Booth remembers, "that day, Ed Hillary pushed the Queen and her crown out of the page one banner lead position. It was a strong pointer to his new life destiny as a world celebrity."³⁴⁸ From that time on at the Star, Booth was the Hillary reporter, unchallenged territory gained on that first day – recording his climbs, his homecoming, his engagement and wedding. "The stories were not always straightforward," he says, "but almost always worth page one". The whole association with Hillary had "a pleasantly personal air to it", as Booth enjoyed both visiting him in his home and the trusting relationship he had with him.³⁴⁹

Hillary seemed then, as now, to be the ideal Kiwi bloke – best summed up, by fellow explorer and mountaineer George Lowe, as an "extra-ordinary" man.³⁵⁰ The job of a biographer, however, should be to at least attempt to probe the common perceptions of a public figure. Booth has sought to do this in parts of the book but not very successfully. He speculates about the nature of Hillary's character and the origins of his mannerisms, but his analyses seldom penetrate very far. For example he uses Hillary's own word "obsessed" when describing his strong desire to be the first person since Scott to reach the South Pole overland, but does not investigate any further into the reasons for this

³⁴⁸ Pat Booth, Deadline: my story, Auckland: Penguin Books, 1997, p.99

³⁴⁹ Booth, Deadline, p.100

³⁵⁰ Bryan James, 'Detail lacking in biography of 20th century hero' [Review of Edmund Hillary], Otago Daily Times, 29 January 1994, p.22

obsession.³⁵¹ There are occasional passages in which Hillary's personality is revealed as complex and contradictory, driven by an ambition to succeed, but no attempt has been made at explanation or analysis. The reader will finish the book knowing a good deal more about what Hillary has done, but not much more about who Hillary is. Clearly that is the way he would want it.

Influences during the first thirty years of Hillary's life are only briefly sketched, a deficiency that a future biographer will need to address. Hillary, the son of a bee-keeper and his wife, seems to have been raised with firm discipline and few expressions of affection. At one time the family lived according to the principles of one of the cults of the day, Radiant Living. This influence in his early life, however, is not explored. Neither is his relationship with his mother, brother and sister, nor his friends from his school and early adult years. Yet Booth does record an episode when Hillary, a lonely and vulnerable new boy at Auckland Grammar School, younger and smaller than most, is singled out by the gymnastic instructor because of his appearance, and placed in "the misfit class with other physical freaks." "I was mortified, and this created in me an enormous sense of inferiority which, even though I developed into a rather large and robust person, I still retain."³⁵² He adds, with characteristic understatement, "I think this incident built up in me... a determination that I would become competent at something."

Hillary's early climbing activities in New Zealand are only superficially dealt with. Booth opens his book with a succinct chapter on the conquest of Everest (as does Hillary's second autobiography), an event, as Lay points out, that has receded into history to such an extent that many must be unaware of what a glorious achievement it was.³⁵³ Quoting from Hillary's first autobiography, Booth does not avoid recording the contrasting recollections that Hillary and Tenzing had of their time on the mountain together, nor the fact that the fiercely nationalistic Indian and Nepalese press were in no rush to acknowledge Hillary's role in the feat, claiming instead, that the glory belonged

³⁵¹ Booth, *Deadline*, p.109

³⁵² Booth, *Edmund Hillary*, p.33

³⁵³ Graeme Lay, 'The beekeeper from Papakura,' [Review of *Edmund Hillary*], *North and South*, July 1999; 160: 107

wholly to his companion Tenzing. In fact, the summit was attained by Hillary first, followed by Tenzing "a rope-length [about six feet]" later, though they agreed to say publicly they made it "almost together".³⁵⁴ Hillary had deep admiration for Tenzing, claiming that he could not have reached the top without him. At the 1997 unveiling of a memorial to him in Darjeeling, Hillary insisted that while he had never regarded himself "as much of a hero, Tenzing undoubtedly was."³⁵⁵ He regrets that while he received a knighthood for the climb, Tenzing, not being a British subject, only received the George Medal.

Hillary has always acknowledged that his success on Everest was the fruit of considerable teamwork and gives credit to the crucial help some fellow climbers gave him in his early career. On subsequent expeditions he was the undisputed leader, yet everyone had a particular job to do, and shared equally all the stresses, strains and dangers so that everyone felt part of a team. As a consequence, for five decades he has steadfastly protested against being singled out as a hero and "our greatest living New Zealander", as he is ubiquitously labelled. Alas, as Butcher points out, such an intrinsically antipodean attitude could only have accelerated his transmogrification from scruffy mountaineering beekeeper to national icon in this small country.³⁵⁶ Morin, Longhurst and Johnston suggest that Hillary's ascent of Everest "valorized the practice of mountaineering as a crucial factor in the formation of a heroic and masculinised New Zealand national identity."³⁵⁷ This masculinity involves the conquering of obstacles – mountains climbed, hostile terrain overcome, the "because it is there" syndrome. As Pickles notes, any account of Hillary's life draws upon discourses of public space and territorial control, appealing to, and perpetuating the theme at the heart of New Zealand's historical geography, ownership and control of land, and its subsequent settlement. And

³⁵⁴ James Ramsay Ullmann, recorder, *Man of Everest: the autobiography of Tenzing*, London: George G. Harrop & Co., 1955, p.267

³⁵⁵ Hillary, *View From the Summit*, p.345

³⁵⁶ Margot Butcher, 'Just call me Ed' [re Hillary], *North and South*, November 2002, p.38

³⁵⁷ K.M. Morin, R. Longhurst and L. Johnston, 'Troubling spaces of mountains and men: New Zealand's Mount Cook and Hermitage Lodge,' *Social and Cultural Geography*, 2(2), 2001:134

she adds that narratives about Hillary continue to be based upon the settlement of New Zealand as colonial space.³⁵⁸

Booth retells the story of how Hillary's knighthood, awarded by the jubilant British immediately after his success, was in fact accepted on his behalf by an equally impressed New Zealand Government.³⁵⁹ "It should have been a great moment, but instead I was aghast," Hillary recalls on first receiving the news. "It was a tremendous honour, of course, but I had never really approved of titles and couldn't imagine possessing one." He went to bed that night feeling "miserable rather than pleased."³⁶⁰ In some way he anticipated that his life would be irrevocably changed. Indeed, celebrity status was immediate, and enduring, and his life became more complex than his image as a laconic, rather brusque, Kiwi icon suggests.³⁶¹ World travel, receptions, lecture tours, investitures, honorary degrees, more expeditions and his humanitarian work in the Himalayas gave Hillary an almost divine status throughout the world. The transition to this state begs for biographical treatment and analysis, but is lacking in this book. Few men could have coped as well as he did and so successfully with such a complete transformation of their lives. Fame rather than mountaineering skills opened most of the doors after Everest, and made it possible for him to raise funds more readily for other projects. And Hillary is grateful for the tremendous boost Everest gave him as it enabled him to "lead exactly the kind of life I have always wanted to".³⁶²

There was one adventure in the early days that Booth missed out on. Hillary led the New Zealand expedition in its 1954 attempt on the peak of Makalu, in the shadow of Everest. A succession of problems, however, defeated them, while Hillary nearly lost his life to altitude sickness. Booth had been invited by Hillary to join the expedition, but the Press Association decided that it was not worth the cost. "The best story," Booth claims, "I

³⁵⁸ Katie Pickles, 'Kiwi icons and the re-settlement of New Zealand as colonial space', *New Zealand Geographer*, October 2002, 58(2): 10

³⁵⁹ Booth, *Edmund Hillary*, p.48

³⁶⁰ Hillary, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975, p.193

³⁶¹ John Henzell, 'Two who are driven to adventure' [re Hillary], *The Press*, December 20, 1997, Sup. 13

³⁶² Terry Bell, *Hillary of Everest: The Years After*, Auckland: Wilson and Horton, 1973, p.9

never wrote.”³⁶³ From then on, Booth’s privileged position as the “Hillary reporter” was lost. Hillary’s best known, because controversial, post-Everest expedition occurred in 1957-58, but Booth can only relate this using secondary sources. Joint British-New Zealand teams, led by Sir Vivien Fuchs, planned to cross Antarctica overland using tractors, each team starting from opposite sides of the continent, with the intention of meeting at the South Pole. Hillary, who organised the New Zealand team, earned world headlines by ignoring instructions, arriving at the pole ahead of Fuchs. Hillary, it seems, could be utterly single-minded in pursuit of his goals. He was widely criticised outside New Zealand, although Fuchs never made an issue of it. Hillary regards such controversies, highlighted by the media, as plain “silly.” Booth examines the expedition in detail and reaches the conclusion, quite correctly in James’s view, that Hillary deliberately set out to beat Fuchs to the pole, though denying it, so that he could claim to be the first man after Scott to reach the South Pole overland.³⁶⁴ In both of his autobiographies Hillary makes it quite clear that he planned to run the expedition in the way that seemed best for him, and from the beginning intended to push further south to the pole if circumstances allowed.³⁶⁵ Booth quotes a person described as very close to Hillary, on one of the significant features of his character: “Well, he was ruthless. He showed that in Antarctica.”³⁶⁶ Mulgrew, who knew him well, and who is quoted in the foreword to this biography, found that “he is a man of balanced judgment and great friendliness, yet he can appear surprisingly thoughtless, even careless of the feelings of others.”³⁶⁷ That is as close as we come to the private man, and it is apparent that this is as much as those that know him are prepared to reveal. Booth, his biographer, is too much in awe of his subject, it seems, to take the matter any further. “The biographer who worships his hero,” Edel states in his manifesto, “blinds himself to the meaning of his material. Only high selection enables a biography to become a story with the simplicity and lucidity of narrative art.”³⁶⁸

³⁶³ Booth, *Deadline*, p.100

³⁶⁴ Bryan James, p.22

³⁶⁵ Hillary, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, p.238; *View From the Summit*, p.173

³⁶⁶ Booth, *Deadline*, p.115

³⁶⁷ Peter Mulgrew, *No Place For Men*, Auckland: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1964, p.95

³⁶⁸ Leon Edel, ‘Biography: A Manifesto,’ *Biography*, vol.1 no.1, 1978, p.2

Despite Hillary's perceived flaws, which appear at odds with his general image, Booth writes that he has near deity status on the Indian sub-continent. Another of his great achievements was his jet boat journey of 2,500 kilometres from the mouth of the Ganges to near its Himalayan sources, in 1977. Everywhere he was welcomed "as a virtually divine being making a pilgrimage which the ordinary people would have felt was the pinnacle of their religious life. By being in his presence, even touching him, they gained a share of this."³⁶⁹ Booth neglects any analysis of this status. Hillary hates the constant glare of publicity that accompanies people such as himself, but he accepts it as unavoidable. One manifestation of his fame is that his opinion is sought on political topics, and people take note of his views. Booth includes a balanced account of his trenchant opinions of New Zealand's political leadership over the past thirty years, making clear his subject's position if not his level of expertise in this field.

It is not just the great adventures, however, that have made Hillary a popular hero. Mulgrew sensed in him "a deep moral conviction, essentially old-fashioned and sometimes even prim."³⁷⁰ A crucial part of it, and one that he feels is his lasting achievement, is the firm belief that a person ought to give something back in this life.³⁷¹ He demonstrates this in his devotion to the welfare of the Sherpa people. It became the dominant purpose of his life, one in which several members of his family, including his wife and children, and his brother, became deeply involved. Booth outlines some of these achievements without going into any practical detail. He sensitively handles the personal tragedies that have shadowed Hillary's life, without delving too far into them, another gap in the book. Hillary's sometimes troubled relationship with his son, Peter, who has also climbed Everest, and his inability to express emotion with other members of his family, is not developed. Hillary does not enlighten us in his autobiographies, and Booth employs no supposition or hypothesis by way of explanation. Hillary, it is apparent, has always displayed an impenetrable reserve, typical of his generation of Kiwi males – "I am not one to display great emotion on important occasions." It is this stoical image that Booth presents to us. Few women feature in the book, although his first wife, Louise,

³⁶⁹ Booth, *Deadline*, p.155

³⁷⁰ Mulgrew, *No Place for Men*, p.95

³⁷¹ Iain Sharp, 'Look back in wonder' [re Hillary], *Sunday Star Times*, 1 August 1999; F:3

clearly an exceptional woman, is the most significant. It's an attitude and an omission that in Hill's view along with the subject and style of Booth's book, "sometimes makes you think you're reading a *Chap's Own*."³⁷² This is not surprising as, in accordance with Hillary's two autobiographies, as Temple notes, this is a book concerning a man's man, the kind of Kiwi male whom R.A.K. Mason saw as the "embodiment of the New Zealand working class... tall, rangy, quiet, unemotional, direct." He also sees in Hillary a strand of Johnson, the main character in John Mulgan's classic novel *Man Alone*.³⁷³ In New Zealand, the phrase "man alone" became a glib response to what is supposed to define an aspect of national maleness, what the *Dictionary of New Zealand English* designates "a type (or stereotype) of the independent, outdoors New Zealander".³⁷⁴ It has been noted, however, that the model of the restrained, under-stated, temperate Kiwi bloke has been under incessant attack for decades. He is said to have outlived his usefulness, to be redundant in the fired-up, zestful society we are encouraged to become.³⁷⁵ Yet the appeal of a man who says "We knocked the bastard off" after scaling the highest mountain on the planet is enduring. And van Beynen likes "that undramatic guy and his quiet delight in understatement and not making a fuss - the inner feelings that remain just that."³⁷⁶

Traditionally the writer of biography had imposed upon him or her, a code of reticence. By the 1990s, however, this had commonly been replaced by complete candour, with the private details behind public actions becoming the focus of attention. Yet, so far, the New Zealand media at large have co-operated with this limited analysis of the life of our national hero, and Booth seems to concur. Temple comments that it was safe, a long time ago, to put Hillary's image on our five-dollar note (the only living New Zealander to be so honoured – and on the note which has the highest circulation), because his image is one we have always been able to trust, and if the myth is greater than the man, then it is

³⁷² David Hill, 'Ed for heights: Sir Edmund Hillary looks back over an extraordinary life' [re Hillary], *Listener*, 31 July 1999; pp.42-43

³⁷³ Philip Temple, 'We even wept a little,' [Review of *View from the Summit*], *New Zealand Books*, October 1999; 9(4): 14; John Mulgan, *Man Alone*, London: Selwyn and Blount, 1939

³⁷⁴ H.W. Orsman and N.Wattie (eds.), *The Reed Dictionary of New Zealand English*, 3rd rev. ed. Auckland: Reed, 2001, p.691

³⁷⁵ Martin van Beynen, 'Passionate People', *The Press*, 19 June 2004, A11

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

neither his fault nor a bad thing.³⁷⁷ And he also claims that myth-making, rather than myth-breaking, is a safer and more rewarding road to take in our relentless desire to feel good about ourselves.³⁷⁸ At times modern biographers do remythologise lives for their own needs.³⁷⁹ In New Zealand, live heroes, such as Hillary, who become icons, are reinvented as ordinary people. It is because of this construction as "ordinary" that they do not have to be perfect. In the case of Hillary, being outspoken and politically contentious, "ruthless" even, is part of his character. And he has secured our enduring affection because he has remained one of us, while Booth perpetuates the myth. Yet, as Rubin claims, biographers must write out of honesty and a search for a higher truth that transcends stereotype and popular culture.³⁸⁰ They are not in the business of protecting the cherished image of a cultural hero. Surely Hillary has grown to understand the mythic role he plays in our national psyche, and just as surely, he is big enough to handle some analysis, not only to get beneath the accolades, but also to test the foundations of the myth. If he does understand the mythic role he has come to play in our national psyche, he does not want to know about it or claim any special powers or attributes.³⁸¹

King points out that the major shortcoming of the book is the too slavish attachment to magazine idiom and style, appropriate for an extended feature, but less satisfactory in book length narration (and the use of "legend" in the subtitle to mean "legendary figure" is typical of this tone). As an account of the life of a great New Zealander, it inexplicably lacks essential detail in places and is untidily and illogically organised. The photographs do not always correspond to the text near at hand and some inaccuracies occur in the captions. The attributions for material drawn from Hillary's own writings are not always clear, and there is no index. King concludes that these characteristics are indicative of a book written in haste.³⁸² Biography in general may be regarded as ranging along a continuum from scholarly to popular to super-pop, the main difference being the extent to which the sources are visible. Scholarly biographies are much more heavily documented

³⁷⁷ Temple, 'The summit of our hopes', *The Press*, Everest 50th Anniversary Special, May 29, 2003, p.2

³⁷⁸ Temple, 'We even wept a little', p.14

³⁷⁹ Law and Hughes, p.13

³⁸⁰ Nancy Rubin, 'Biographer's Dilemma: The Humanization of an Infamous Historical Figure', *Biography and Source Studies*, vol.2, 1996, p.78

³⁸¹ Philip Temple, 'The summit of our hopes', p.2

³⁸² King, 'Past Imperfect', p.122

than popular biographies, and the citations for the sources are often more thoroughgoing and complete.³⁸³ This biography, then, is more “popular” than “scholarly”. Nevertheless, despite the fact that it is no more than a biographical sketch that cements, rather than challenges, the popular image of Hillary, it will serve to introduce new generations of New Zealanders to an authentic, non-conformist twentieth century hero. However, for such an important figure in New Zealand’s cultural history, a more robust biographical investigation is required.

³⁸³ Lynn Z. Bloom, ‘Popular and Super-pop Biographies: Definitions and Distinctions’, *Biography*, 3(3), 1979, p.224

CHAPTER FIVE

BIOGRAPHICAL PRINCIPLES

There are several fundamental features of biographical method against which these biographies may be assessed. These include: the choice and treatment of the subject, the relationship between the subject and the biographer, ethical concerns, the availability of sources and the variety of forms. These principles make it possible to explore the extent of the changes in biographical writing in New Zealand between the two decades. In discussing the changes the term 'traditional' refers to the British Victorian influence brought to New Zealand by the early colonists. The term 'modern' refers to late twentieth century biographical concerns.

Choice and Treatment of Subject

The characteristic form of Victorian biography was commemorative: for the heirs and admirers of a public figure the most fitting memorial was a large-scale "Life", based almost exclusively on the subject's own papers (many of them carefully preserved for the purpose) and so taking the writer at his or her own valuation. The intention was to sustain a respect for the nation's political and intellectual elite.³⁸⁴ Biographies of this kind continued to be published in the twentieth century – here, that of Haast, in particular, Freyberg as well. The desire to provide exemplary lives has also been stated explicitly by many feminist biographers. Even Liz Stanley, who complains of the uncritical practice of much feminist biography, accepts without demur the provision of "feminist heroes to stand alongside the more usual subjects of auto/biography" as an unquestioned goal of these works.³⁸⁵ Munro's study of Aubert is an example here.

³⁸⁴ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, London: Longman, 1991, p.77

³⁸⁵ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p.255

Not everyone agrees with modern versions of this old function of biography. After acknowledging that biographers "are once more in the business of writing exemplary lives," Skidelsky points to what he sees as an important distinction:

But now the example is the life itself, not what the life enabled the person to achieve. Or, more precisely, the life is the achievement; what used to be called the achievement is now only one accompaniment, possible [sic] a minor one, of a style of living. Quite obviously on this criterion a much wider range of lives is opened up to biography, paucity of achievement in the traditional sense being no barrier to being written about; conversely, some hitherto biography-worthy subjects might find themselves 'lifeless', because their (genuinely) blameless lives are no longer sufficiently exemplary to record; or because they imprudently failed to leave enough evidence of sexual or other unorthodoxy to make them suitable 'role models' for the next generation.³⁸⁶

As Law and Hughes note, one need not accept Skidelsky's implicit attitude to acknowledge his point about the wider range of lives now available in print and their utility to previously silenced groups.³⁸⁷ At the same time, as Alexander points out, it offers readers glimpses of the universal humanity of prominent figures, and in uncovering that humanity, promotes a profoundly democratic view of the links between supposedly ordinary lives and those recognized as of particular significance.³⁸⁸

The period in which a biography is written is important as the significance of the subject inevitably changes with time. In New Zealand, explorers, such as Haast, became the first conventional heroes, heirs to the tradition that gave preference to masculine exploits and manly virtues. Both biographies of 'great men' written in the 1990s share some continuity with that tradition. Bohan's work was the fifth in a series of biographies of Grey. In rewriting lives to fit our needs, our present day culture follows a pattern familiar in Victorian (and earlier) biography. Freyberg's biographer was self-chosen. His son, he believed, would present a sympathetic, uncritical review of his life. There is a strong element of apologia in this work, similar to that of Haast. Its difference lies in the filter of the contemporary social, political and personal background used by the writer.

³⁸⁶ Skidelsky, 'Only Connect', p.13

³⁸⁷ Law and Hughes (eds.), p.6

³⁸⁸ Alexander, p.88

Simpson's 1940 centennial survey claimed to identify, and attempted to explain in general terms, the unique experiences of Pakeha women, a previously silenced group, over the previous one hundred years. It was not until the 1970s, however, that women began to be written into New Zealand historiography. Women's biography was of primary importance here because research in women's history had always focused on recovering the lives of individual women. Since feminist writers brought to light evidence of the wide range and depth of experiences of women in the past, there has been an upsurge in the writing of women's biographies. The expressed purpose of Munro's 1990s study of Aubert was to retrieve the story of a woman whose cultural contributions had been ignored by male historians, and to situate her life within the constraints she faced as a woman. Munro also found the life story of the French nun not only relevant to the development of a national spirituality in the late nineteenth century, but also relevant to her own life and to all New Zealanders in the 1990s. King's aim, in his biography of Frame, was to relate, with "compassionate truth",³⁸⁹ the life of a fellow writer with whom he shared a natural empathy. The work is shaped, however, by the benefits and limitations of writing about a living subject as Frame remained always in control of how she was to be portrayed.

Part of the egalitarian tradition has been the reluctance of New Zealanders to promote the achievements of one person over another. This influenced biographical writing by expanding the scope of its subjects to include formerly neglected yet significant sectors of the population. Bagnall and Petersen, in the 1940s, chose the "lesser" figure of Colenso in whose biography they aimed to take a more "objective" stance than had former biographers of "great men". This critical distance allowed more freedom, within the biographers' own ethical boundaries, about how the subject was portrayed. In the 1990s other biographers discovered subjects whose deeds, within their historical context, served to increase the knowledge and understanding of New Zealand culture. Fairburn took an innovative approach to the study of Cox's life, combining several historical methods in order to understand his world. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the need also seemed to increase for the revival of the idea of the hero. The "great man"

³⁸⁹ King, *Tread Softly*, p.16

extolled then, though, was very different from those heroes of the 1890s or the 1940s. He or she was chosen for his or her ability to represent the ordinary man or woman. Booth's biography of Hillary perpetuates his popular image as the archetypal, mythic hero of amazing accomplishments, who desires to remain an ordinary New Zealand bloke. As such, the biography allows the reader and the biographer to join together in lauding the values and virtues that he represents.

Biographies have also, in recent years, included increasing detail on all aspects of the subject's life together with examples of "revelation" – how the public image and the private life diverged. A modern biographer may, or may not, choose to reveal intimate details, or may not have the information to do so. But by probing beneath the public persona he or she can yield greater insights. This, however, as we shall see later, depends on the co-operation of living subjects, on ethical concerns, and on the availability of sources.

The Relationship between the Biographer and the Subject

During the early years of the twentieth century, and under the influence of the new psychology, the point of view of biography began to change. The author's relation to the subject completely altered. As Virginia Woolf put it, in 1927:

He is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling ever slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal... he preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgment... he does not think himself constrained to follow every step of the way. Raised upon a little eminence which his independence has made for him, he sees his subject spread about him. He chooses; he synthesises; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist.³⁹⁰

Between the 1940s and the 1990s, the relationship between the biographer and the subject became crucial to the understanding of the form. The nature of that relationship is dependent on the author's distance from the subject in both space and time. The type of

³⁹⁰Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', first published in *New York Herald Tribune*, October 30, 1927, reprinted in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf*, London: Hogarth Press, 1958, p.152

relationship has a bearing on what the author regards as significant in the subject's life. Each biographer, out of the often huge quantity of material that is available as evidence, chooses that which supports the image and ideas (which may be self-conflicting) he or she has of the subject. Any aspect of a subject's life can be exaggerated, minimized, ignored or suppressed, depending on the biographer's overt or covert agenda. Nevertheless, the good biographer understands the problems of excessive subjectivity and tries to avoid or moderate them, while at the same time aiming to portray the whole sense of their subject.

Clifford noted, in the 1960s, that writers were increasingly reluctant to take an extreme position towards their subject, and attempted to present unattractive traits in such a way that the reader would be able to judge their significance. They were no longer willing to censor, or to excuse, or to consciously rationalize. "The picture presented", he said, "may sometimes be more ambiguous than those of their predecessors, but the biographer's constant awareness of the intricate paradoxes in both his subject and himself, tends to produce more satisfying, rounded lives".³⁹¹ Traditionally, commentators on biographical writing have stressed this empathetic orientation to the "subject" by the biographer, who nevertheless has an "objective" role as the interpreter and presenter of the finished work. Empathy, which Holmes maintains "is the most powerful, the most necessary, and the most deceptive, of biographical emotions,"³⁹² almost always creates insight. With the obligation to present portraits which are even-handed and accountable, this helps contribute to the heightened sense of subjects as coherent individuals. That coherence is based, in Holmes' view, on the profoundly hopeful assumption that people really are responsible for their actions, and that there is moral continuity between the public and the private life.³⁹³ But he also asks, "by the very act of biographical empathy, how much does the biographer create the fiction of a past life, the projection of his or her own personality

³⁹¹ James Clifford, ed., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism, 1560-1960*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. xviii

³⁹² Holmes, *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer*, London: Flamingo, 2001, p.4

³⁹³ Holmes, *Footsteps*, p.175

into a story which is dramatically convincing, even historically correct, but simply not the human truth as it happened?"³⁹⁴

Discussion of the biographer's role (as a biographical participant) raises the issue of not simply the degree to which the writer should place his or her "voice" within a sociopolitical context, but also methodological and ethical questions concerning the biographer's role. Ferrier, in considering those kinds of life history which seem to "give a voice" to the previously silenced and marginalised, asks whose voice in fact will be ultimately heard; who will speak *for* and *about* whom, with what licence and authority, what subsequent recognition; who finally shapes the story of a life?³⁹⁵

In order to illustrate the differences in author/subject relationships, the biographies chosen here as case studies may be divided into three types: historical biography, in which the author works from books and documents, printed facts and sources that are available at the time of writing (Colenso, Grey, Women, Aubert, Cox); biography written relatively soon after the subject's death by someone who had a close relationship with that subject and access to personal papers (Haast, Freyberg); biography written while the subject was still alive (Frame, Hillary). Of the historical biographies, the biographers of Colenso and Cox have the most neutral approach. Bagnall and Petersen advocated the need to master the total historical record of their subject, Colenso, in order to build up as rounded a portrait as possible.³⁹⁶ Fairburn went beyond available evidence to include supposition and plausible hypotheses to build up the most likely picture of Cox. Simpson, on the other hand, let pioneer legend and excessive subjectivity influence her in her review of New Zealand women, while Munro relinquished her critical distance by identifying too closely with Aubert in relating her story to herself and to contemporary life.

When the relationship between an author and his or her subject is a close one, causing difficulty in keeping a critical distance, understandable sympathy (rather than empathy)

³⁹⁴ Holmes, *Sidetracks*, p.197

³⁹⁵ Ian Donaldson (et al), *Shaping Lives*, Canberra: Australian National University, 1992, p.v

³⁹⁶ A.G. Bagnall & G.C. Petersen, p.vii

may tempt the author to overstep the bounds of truthful and verifiable statement. The biographies of both Haast and Freyberg were written by their respective (and respectful) sons. Both laid claim to their father's choice as biographer, and each felt that they have the right, as immediate family members, to protect what they regarded as their intellectual property rights to the personal papers in their possession. But in their selection of evidence both biographies became exercises in filial piety, honouring their fathers' achievements and declining to analyse their limitations. Such an exercise is different from an independent biography, which, despite the defects and omissions it may have, does have the advantage of being able at least to tell the unguarded "truth".

Live subjects are, of course, of inestimable value to their biographers. The most obvious advantage is the ability to check the primary source for accuracy. There is also the opportunity to experience the subject's immediacy and vitality, and to share in the sense of social and political events that may have influenced them. One disadvantage, however, is the biographers' lack of complete freedom to say what they want about the subject. Access to personal papers may be limited because the living subject, and family pressure, may require some things to remain private, and the subject may also exercise control over the direction the biography takes. The emphasis in the biographies of Frame and Hillary, then, has shifted from the "subjective" views of the writers, to recognition of their collaborative and reflexive roles. In a literary biography, the biographer has perhaps a closer relationship to and greater insight into the subject because they are involved in the same activity. For King, however, contemporary biography necessarily meant that details too sensitive for immediate disclosure must be left to a later biographer. Despite the restrictions, he felt that, in this case anyway, the compensations gained in writing about the life of a living person outweighed the restraints. Booth, on the other hand, was restricted mainly to secondary sources, including Hillary's first autobiography, so that there are still major elements of his life that remain speculative.

Ethical Concerns

From early in the twentieth century, the goal of veracity or "truthfulness" has increasingly replaced or modified didacticism and hero-worship in the writing of biography, but this realism was tempered, for a remarkably long time, by a code of reticence that was imposed upon the writer. Although mild by late twentieth century terms, Bagnall and Petersen were atypical, in the 1940s, in their frank portrayal of Colenso. By the late 1960s a more general reaction against this reticence, which we are still witnessing, began to develop. By the 1990s, complete candour ruled, increasing the popularity of biography, with the private details behind public actions becoming the focus of assessment. Associated with this upsurge are the numerous biographies (such as Booth's biography of Hillary), and ghost-written autobiographies and memoirs, of sports and film stars, which are often indistinguishable from magazine and newspaper articles that also profile them. As Ellman notes, we feel compelled today to explore carefully aspects of the mind and behaviour that Boswell would have regarded as not worthy to record and not suitable to publish.³⁹⁷

A fundamental question that presents itself to every biographer and, perhaps, is never resolved, is: on what grounds does anyone claim the right to construct what purports to be a total view of another person's life? Always the argument for biography rests on the assumption that some people's lives show us themes and conflicts that are significant to a whole culture.³⁹⁸ Yet there is seemingly limitless scope for controversy, because the areas of contention are so diverse and the biographer is necessarily intrusive. For living subjects there is a strong case to have the legal right over permission for the publication of a biography of themselves in their lifetime. In the absence of such a law, the would-be biographer and publisher have a moral responsibility to inform and consult a subject, and respect his or her wishes before the decision to commission the book is taken.³⁹⁹ A

³⁹⁷ Richard Ellman, 'Literary Biography', *Golden Codgers: biographical speculations*, London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.4

³⁹⁸ Dianne Wood Middlebrook, 'Spinning Straw into Gold', *The Literary Biography: problems and solutions*, Dale Salwak, ed., Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1996, p.87

³⁹⁹ Natasha Spender, 'Private and Public Lives', *The Literary Biography: problems and solutions*, Dale Salwak (ed.), Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1996, p.105

further ethical problem with contemporary biography is the privacy rights of third parties and how to depict the supporting cast of characters, especially if they are still alive. Just as a person on becoming a public figure loses a measure of privacy, so too do biographers work in a social, legal and moral universe that has to make at least some provision for the sensibilities and vulnerabilities of others.

To complicate matters, ethical standards amongst writers are mutable, while those of the wider society are in flux.⁴⁰⁰ Any "serious" biographer, however, begins by laying down some ethical foundations for his or her work. The chief concern is not sensationalism, but an attempt to chart the subject's life story, as fully and as balanced as he or she is able, within its historical context.

Sources

Whether the biographer's main concern is with the recreation of a life or an explanation of how a life was lived within a particular social and historical context, what is achieved is determined in the first instance by the extent and character of the surviving sources. The twentieth century was characterized by an accumulation of available source material, which resulted in what Cockshut describes as "biography dominated by documents, strong on facts, and wary of too much interpretation."⁴⁰¹ Skidelsky's description of modern biography is similar: "Truth is equated with length, with 'telling all', with piling up detail on detail."⁴⁰² Examples of such works are Skidelsky's own three volume John Maynard Keynes: a biography (1983-2001), and Michael Holroyd's Bernard Shaw, (1988-91), also in three volumes. While this pursuit of fact, of minute, accurate scholarship can go too far, this demand for accurate scholarship is a characteristic of our day, and biography is peculiarly suited to satisfying it.⁴⁰³ Yet the use of all-inclusive evidence, together with the effort made by the biographer to observe critical distance

⁴⁰⁰ Doug Munro, 'It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet: James Herriot and the ethical questions of contemporary biography', Biography and Source studies, Frederick R. Karl, New York, AMS Press, 2003, v.7, p.77

⁴⁰¹ A.O.J. Cockshut, foreword to Modernising Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918-1939, by Ruth Hoberman, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, p.x;

⁴⁰² Skidelsky, 'Only Connect', p.8

⁴⁰³ Alexander, p.89

from the subject, has led to discussion about the problems of evaluating evidence, with less certainty that the truth can, in fact, be told.

During the fifty years between the 1940s and the 1990s in New Zealand, biographical writing has been transformed from one with a relative paucity of materials to abundance, thus raising acute difficulties of selection and specialisation. In the 1940s, the biographers of both Haast and Colenso were in unusually privileged positions with respect to sources. Heinrich Haast, who looked back to Victorian biographical methodology, was in possession of a vast quantity of his father's papers, which he quoted from extensively to support the case for his father's recognition. Bagnall, as librarian at the Turnbull library, had free access to national archives, but selected material from Colenso's reports and writings in a more methodical way in order to create a narrative that would be of most interest to his readers. When his, and Petersen's, research came to a period when there was no such record, they were left with a gap in his life story. Simpson was in the weaker position of having limited access to sources from which to construct her book about the lives of pioneer women. In an appendix at the end of the book, she notes, and evaluates, just "some of" her sources, from published books to unpublished letters and diaries, journals and reminiscences, which are of questionable accuracy. The range of those sources written by women is only a fraction of those unearthed in the national archives by subsequent authors who edited the later collections of women's life stories in the 1990s.

The writer's selection and evaluation of evidence contributes to the originality of the biographical study. It is too simplistic, however, to believe that facts alone constitute the truth. It is the significance of those facts and their positioning that are important, and it is the selectivity of the author that distinguishes that significance. While we can never know the absolute truth of experience, the biographer selects items which he feels are most representative, most vivid, and most able to communicate the sense of his subject to his readers, thus influencing how the subject is portrayed. On the other hand, there may be practical limitations in biographical data. In filling in gaps in information, by speculation or hypothesis, the biographer is again constantly making judgments about relevance and significance, which may create distortion. Once a biographer adds to the primary sources

documents of other kinds, or commentary of his or her own, the possibilities for structural manipulation increase. It is not primarily the materials, but the biographer's management of them, which determines the shape of the biographical life.⁴⁰⁴ This leads back to, and can be seen to depend upon, the biographer's view of the subject, which ultimately influences the reader's image of that subject.

Not every biographer, however, would concede that selection is a vital factor in the biographical process. Both Heinrich Haast and Jessie Munro favoured a massively accumulative approach, aspiring to "total" knowledge of their biographical subjects. There is a risk here that lack of judicious selectivity will reduce to theory that all facts are of equal value, and may submerge the subject in all-inclusive detail. On the other hand, authors who are diligent in tracking down all relevant source materials (not simply confining themselves to the private papers of their subject – the easy way) and in explicating all relevant contextual issues, have been invaluable in filling serious gaps in historical knowledge.⁴⁰⁵ Haast and Freyberg confined themselves to the private papers, and their own reminiscences and observations, of their respective fathers, while Munro was restricted to secondary sources only, and so her work, in comparison to theirs, is more contextualised. Authors who have a close relationship with their subjects, Freyberg again, limit their works by what they are prepared to reveal. Other biographers of living subjects, such as King and Booth, are also restricted in the amount of detail they wished, or chose, to disclose.

Biography may draw upon other sources besides public archives and documents. Diaries, autobiographies, and oral histories as told by living subjects, supply a wealth of information about private lives. There are some similarities between the three sources. Usually, oral history is dependent on the face-to-face interview, whereas the biographer may not have met the subject but may rely on interviews with close relatives and friends as well as any diaries, letters or other personal writing – including any autobiographical account – by the individual. King employs both techniques in his biography of Frame.

⁴⁰⁴ Jeanne W. Halperin, 'Biographical Images: Effects of Formal Features on the Way We See a Life', *Biography*, 1(4):7

⁴⁰⁵ Marwick, p.138

Booth does so as well, to a more limited extent, in his biography of Hillary. However, whereas the oral history of an individual is based on an interactive, collaborative encounter, the biography need not be so. And while a biography is more edited and "authored" by the writer, the oral history or sociological life history approach is more inclined to enable the individual subject to "speak".⁴⁰⁶ The life of intimacy and of day-to-day events is particularly difficult for biographers to recapture, and the use of personal material, or interview, for purposes of accurate information can easily have its risks. Although the biographer may not invent dialogue (a notable exception is Edmund Morris's Dutch, a biography of Robert Reagan), which may cast doubts on the veracity of the biography as a whole, he or she may use short quotations from letters and diaries, poetry and prose, which have the immediacy of dialogue. This is particularly evident in the biographies of Haast, Frame, Hillary and Cox. A literary biographer, such as King, often has, in addition, a lot more written material available as evidence than do authors of other forms of biography.

An autobiography is an important source for a biography. It must, however, be used with care as it is the story a person chooses to tell about his or her life, what is remembered of it, how things were viewed at the time and what he or she wants others to know. A literary biographer may also use the autobiographical "subtext" of his subject's books (if there is one) in addition to the autobiographies, in order to construct a biography. Post-modernists, such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, however, disagree that this is possible as they circumvent references to the author, and ignore both the act of writing and the possible meanings the author may have wished to express.⁴⁰⁷ King refers to the subtext of Frame's autobiographies, but he does so with a great deal of caution, since other evidence made it clear that not everything in them was true in the sense of a documentary depiction of events. He therefore worked from the assumption that her literary persona was a fictional construction, unreliable as a source of life facts. Booth had available as his major source Hillary's first autobiography, and quoted extensively

⁴⁰⁶ Brian Roberts, Biographical Research, Buckingham (U.K.): Open University Press, 2002, p.52

⁴⁰⁷ John Halpern, 'The Biographer's Revenge', The Literary Biography: problems and solutions, Dale Salwick (ed.), Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1996, p.149

from it. Dependent as he is on this and other secondary sources, it is not enough to enable any assessment of his subject's character and motivation.

One of the main reasons why it was possible to give a relatively full account of the private lives of the Victorians was that they conducted voluminous private correspondence. No other source brings to life so clearly the family and social relationships of people in the past. The biographers of the 1940s (Haast, Bagnall and Petersen, and Simpson) used letters extensively as their source material, and they are also an important source of information particularly for women biographers in the 1990s. Such sources, however, may not be reliable, because letters (and diary entries) are constructs. As McLeod points out, "The letter-writer constructs herself for each different correspondent. And we, the readers, conjure up both writer and recipient".⁴⁰⁸ Another source which is in some ways even more revealing of personality and opinion is the diary. The diarist, though, may be as much preoccupied with his or her own subjective response as with the external events which he or she has witnessed. Fairburn used the diary of Cox as the major source for his biography, even though this type of factual or objective diary can be self-revealing only indirectly as it eschews in the main any expression of personal thought and feeling, and records for the most part only external happenings. Nevertheless, it is used here as an important framework for the hypotheses that Fairburn set up to examine. Personal recollections or memoirs can contain valuable material for the biographer, but again he or she must be circumspect in their use. Based as they are to a great extent on memory, with its inherent fallibility which increases with time, they may also have been written with publicity in mind. The biographers of both Freyberg and Hillary use memoir, but its efficacy is compromised by their attempts to deal with complex personal relationships between themselves and their subjects.

⁴⁰⁸ Marion McLeod, 'Patchwork Panorama: Herstory – and the bigger the patch, the more fascinating the yarn', [Review of *My Hand Will Write*], *Listener*, 25 May 1996, p.44

Variety of Forms

A major characteristic of modern biography internationally has been the increasing diversity of forms. Holmes attributes the inauguration of this diversity to Lytton Strachey. Strachey, as Holmes describes him, was perhaps less of a truth-teller than a destroyer of illusions and liberator of forms. "What he released was a generation of brilliant experimenters in biographical narrative that at last began to ask *how* can lives be genuinely reconstructed: what is memory, what is time, what is character, what is 'evidence' in a human story?"⁴⁰⁹ What it meant, in the early years of the twentieth century was that the monumental form lost its rigidity, and was recognised at last as a subtle, responsive art, as various as the lives it contained. This move to a more flexible view of representing a life, had, by the end of the century, led to the development of an extreme diversity of forms as biographers sought the means to convey the truth of a life effectively. Some of these new forms included literary biography, psychobiography, feminist biography, and what may be termed "socio-historical" biography.

Selection, structure, and style are among the formal features that control the image in a biography. Nearly all of the new forms of biography continue to rely structurally on extended chronological narrative rather than thematic or analytic interpretation. They rely, in other words as Walter puts it, on engaging the reader in a good story, though in most cases professing aims beyond that story. And it remains a linear narrative because it is inherently bound to the cycle of life and death, although this does encourage a simplified interpretation of events which may be misleading. Too much information, however, may prevent the narrative from moving forward, so that strict condensation and selection of evidence is required.⁴¹⁰ Over the fifty years under review here, the structure of New Zealand biographies remained conservative, employing conventional narrative techniques with a chronological pattern of life delivered with some general assessment. There are few that are experimental or innovative in presentation. Fairburn's study of

⁴⁰⁹ Richard Holmes, *Sidetracks*, p.372

⁴¹⁰ James Walter, 'Biography, Psychobiography and Cultural Space', *Shaping Lives*, p.265

Cox is an exception, yet each part in his work is a narrative in itself, as he sets up, tests hypotheses and finally solves his “puzzle”.

The biographical narrative aims not just at conveying information about the subject but, more importantly, at getting the reader to feel something about that subject. The meaningfulness of a successful biography inheres in the story that the biographer has made out of the subject's life. The twentieth century was not only an age that was more aware of fallibility it also allowed considerable freedom of expression, something very important to the biographer, if he or she is to tell the whole truth. And the release from traditional hagiography allowed for a freer technique and enabled biography to become more creative. Like drama, this involves more than simply what the subject did. It explores motivation and sustains overarching themes and ideas that unite the individual through action.⁴¹¹ The move to a more flexible view of representing life sometimes introduces quasi-fictional elements. Edmund Bohan attempted this in his biography of Grey, using anecdotes and the dexterous building up of incidents to achieve his effect. On the contrary, when a biography is dependent on external event, such as Booth's biography of Hillary, it quickly runs dry unless it is accompanied by an attempt to understand personality and motivation. Part of the interest in Cox's life is the way Fairburn creatively unfolds, builds and finally solves the “puzzle” of his subject's life.

The late twentieth century has seen literary biography especially freed of Victorian inhibitions, and emerge as a virtually new genre. Until the early years of the twenty-first century, literary biography remained a minority mode in New Zealand. As Antony Alpers notes, because this country has as yet a very short history, much of its biography and virtually all of its literary biography must be concerned with persons not very long dead. This class of biography, therefore, has advantages, and difficulties, not present in biography of an historical nature.⁴¹² One of the difficulties is that facts may not become accessible in the order in which a biographer may need them, or the timing of the access may be outside the biographer's control. In practice, this can mean that the book may be

⁴¹¹ Ira B. Nadel, ‘Theatrical Lives’, *Biography and Sources Studies*, Frederick R. Karl, ed., New York: AMS Press, 2003, v.7, p.102

⁴¹² Antony Alpers, ‘Literary Biography (in New Zealand)’, *Biography in New Zealand*, p.25

written before it is possible to give a full account of the life, or the biographer can afford to wait until it is possible to do so. Alpers had published his Life of Katherine Mansfield in 1954,⁴¹³ a work he describes as “a youthful book and a premature biography.”⁴¹⁴ Some twenty-six years later he published a revised version of her life as further information became available.⁴¹⁵ King’s biography of Frame is not a literary biography in the orthodox sense in that it does not involve a criticism of her writing. As the subtitle emphasises, it is determinedly about her life rather than her art. King also had the added advantages, and difficulties, of writing about a living writer: the book was written with her co-operation but not interference. It is therefore King’s interpretation of her life and times, which was limited to her account of her experience of life that traces where her work had its origin and how it developed.

One of the most radical innovations in the writing of biography has been the application of psychoanalytic concepts to historical characters, stemming from the work of Freud, Jung and others around the turn of the twentieth century.⁴¹⁶ The aim of psychoanalytically informed biography (psychobiography) is to replace “commonsense assumptions” with one of the schemata of psychological expertise currently in use. As biographical writing has developed it has drawn on psychology’s body of theory to explore influences on the subject’s perceptions of life and interactions with others for interpretation of character and assessment of motivation. Freud’s theory turned on the concept of the unconscious – that part of the mind imprinted by the experience of traumas in infancy, which determines the emotional response of the individual to the world around him in later life.⁴¹⁷ Although the primary use of psychoanalysis lay in the treatment of psychiatric disorders, Freud, and the many followers who modified or extended his theory, believed that it also offered a key to the understanding of historical personalities. From the 1950s onwards this approach to biography had a considerable following, especially in the United States where psychoanalysis was more widely

⁴¹³ Antony Alpers, Life of Katherine Mansfield, London: Cape, 1954

⁴¹⁴ Alpers, ‘Literary Biography’, p.19

⁴¹⁵ Antony Alpers, Life of Katherine Mansfield, London: Cape, 1980

⁴¹⁶ see Peter Loewenberg, Decoding the Past: the psychohistorical approach, New York: Knopf, Random House, 1982

⁴¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, An Outline of Psychoanalysis, (authorized translation by James Strachey), London: Hogarth Press, 1949

accepted than in any other country. At its best, for example in Erik Erikson's Young Man Luther,⁴¹⁸ it introduces a valuable element of psychological realism into historical biography, in which the inner drives can be restored to historical figures, instead of confining their motives to the public sphere in which their careers were played out.⁴¹⁹ The most widely noted deficiency in Freudian method of personality analysis, however, lies in his emphasis on the earliest years of life as a key to understanding historical figures, because evidence about the childhood of most is naturally hard to uncover and verify. Also there is no reason to assume that claims of psychoanalysis are valid for previous ages.

Few biographers have enough of a mastery of psychoanalytic theory to include it as part of their exploration into the characters of their subjects, while psychological techniques remain difficult to convert for lay purposes. It is easier to show a life in action or through his or her works, which reveal a personality, rather than the inner life of thought and emotion. The greatest obstacle to the biographer who wishes to proceed like a psychoanalyst is the inability to interview and observe the subject in person. This prevents him or her from obtaining the corroborative evidence necessary to establish the validity of insights, or to formulate hypotheses, about various aspects of the personality.⁴²⁰ As well, Walter points out, authors must be aware that the thoughts and feelings of a subject on any occasion can only remain conjecture and that they must make a distinction between interpretation and fact, and acknowledge that theory and speculation do not have the same status as verifiable evidence.⁴²¹ The ultimate appeal of a subject, he adds, can rest only on the explanatory power of the biographical narrative, not on some reference to the unknowable thoughts of the subject.⁴²² The biographer who has studied the development of his or her subject from childhood to maturity, however, is much more likely to make the right inferences. It is for this reason that during the twentieth century biographers have increasingly stressed the private and inner lives of the subjects as well as their public careers.

⁴¹⁸ Erik Erikson, Young Man Luther: a study of psychoanalysis and history, London: Faber and Faber, 1959

⁴¹⁹ Tosh, p.80

⁴²⁰ Walter Langer, The Mind of Adolf Hitler: the Secret Wartime Report, New York: Signet, 1972, p.28

⁴²¹ Walter, 'Biography, Psychobiography and Cultural Space', p.274

⁴²² Walter, 'Biography, psychobiography and Cultural Space' p.279

In New Zealand psychobiography, and the use of psychological insights to illuminate experience, has been a minority mode. Those biographies written in the 1940s made no more than commonsense assumptions about the possible motivations and intentions of their subjects. For those biographies written in the 1990s there has been a tendency to search for what is valuable in the psychological theory and techniques and to use them cautiously. Bohan makes some psychological insinuations about Grey but avoids analysis of his character in depth, even though there are definable symptoms of delusion and paranoia in Grey's personality, and despite his apparent dysfunctional characteristics being implicated in political events.⁴²³ King's biography of Frame does not venture into any psychoanalysis of her, but by his selective use of her psychiatric case notes allows readers to make their own assessment of her character. If psychological techniques had been employed, it could have been claimed that, in Freud's conceptualisation, the culturally-achieving artist and the culturally mal-adapted neurotic begin at the exact same point of alienation. The former can act self-therapeutically and share his meaning with others [as Frame could be said to have done]; the latter is merely less adept at exploiting his creative unconscious.⁴²⁴ Fairburn emphasises a commonsense approach to psychological insight (that is, his own perspective, an approach which has its risks) with which, by a process of elimination, he suggests the most likely personality of Cox. As Fairburn says himself, very often "common sense knowledge" is trivial. But it is not always so. As common sense knowledge is unreflective and unquestioned, it may contain ideas about the world which are interesting once they are made explicit and elaborated upon. They can serve to enhance the plausibility of claims based on fragmentary evidence in part because they often furnish us with the best explanations of human beliefs, actions and desire.⁴²⁵ (This point is very debatable as it implies not only that there is one "commonsense", but that it is also culturally specific). The biographer, with the increased availability of sources, may simply be in the position to know more, and more variously. In this subtlety, and this relativity, biography is post-Freud and post-Einstein. Indeed

⁴²³ Cadogan, p. 116

⁴²⁴ Donna Artz, 'Psychohistory and Its Discontents', *Biography*, 1979; 1(3):7-10

⁴²⁵ Miles Fairburn, *Social History: problems, strategies and methods*, New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999, pp.52, 55

biography can provide a kind of ethical mirror, in which we can see ourselves and our lives from new angles, with sudden force.⁴²⁶

One of the movements against traditional historical writing was a composite one which arose about the 1970s. It consisted of feminist and black historians in all western late-industrialist societies, but most noticeably in Britain and the United States of America, reacting against the "old" history's fixation with the "white male elite", and was inspired by the political mobilisation of women and blacks at that time. The goal was to write compensatory history, revealing the gendered and racial dimensions of oppression in the past.⁴²⁷ The "second wave" feminist movement of the 1970s influenced biographical writing by highlighting gender differences and the need to provide space for the distinctive nature of women's experience. In New Zealand, following the success of "first wave" feminism at the turn of the century, women's gains had been, from the 1910s through the 1940s, moderated to some extent. Simpson's study of The Women of New Zealand, one of the centennial surveys, was the first historical work to specify a separate and significant past for Pakeha women and to identify women's particular experiences. The period between "first wave" feminism and "second wave" feminism in the 1970s, coincided with a time when New Zealand literature was heavily shaped by a masculine tradition which severely reduced New Zealand women's literary publishing in the period 1930-60. This masculinist culture began to decline, however, in the 1950s and 60s. In New Zealand, from this time, women began to be written in to this nation's history. Women's biography is of primary importance in this historiography. Since the 1970s, when feminists brought to light source material that revealed the wide range and depth of subjects and experiences of women in the past, there has been an upsurge in the writing of women's biographies.

Feminist biographies are written with a different intent than those by and about men. Many feminists maintain that the dominant male strategy is chronological and deals with success, while women's narrative is discontinuous, digressive, fragmented, suggesting a

⁴²⁶ Holmes, Sidetracks, p.375

⁴²⁷ Fairburn, Social History, p.17

reflection of women's lives, and often deals with themes of power and oppression.⁴²⁸ Munro's story of Aubert, in the 1990s, presented a feminist perspective on a significant woman in the past whose life had been "hidden". The purpose was to recover a woman whose cultural contributions had been effaced, and to situate her life within the constraints she faced as a woman. King's *Life of Frame*, also from the 1990s, is a male's view of a living, female fellow writer. Feminist critics, though quick to identify misogyny or sexism, have rarely considered that writing by men might be read as feminist. Although King's biography is not overtly so, again it involves the presentation of the life of a woman who chose to "hide" from society in pursuit of writing. Yet it also illustrates the differences between a feminist writing about a woman subject and a man writing about a woman subject. *Frame* is not assessed as a woman, so it is not a complete picture from the feminist point of view. Nevertheless, both the biographies, of Aubert and *Frame*, highlight the differences between what was possible and acceptable in the 1940s and the progress made in the telling of women's lives by the 1990s.

As we have seen historical biographies have generally dealt with elites whose lives are presented to us in narrative fashion. Over the last two or three decades, however, the growing interest in social history, and its concern with large aggregates of subordinate people, has had an impact on the writing of biography. The tracing of life histories of such individuals, in the form of biographical writing, can also prove to be invaluable to social historians. Such people are inherently difficult for the social historian to understand since their lives are so different from the one to which he or she belongs, and the amount of reliable information that the social historian can discover about them is inherently minute since they usually generated few surviving records about themselves.⁴²⁹ Biographical research also has the important merit of aiding the task of understanding major social shifts (such as those that occurred between the 1940s and the 1990s in New Zealand) by investigating how new experiences are interpreted by individuals within families, small groups and institutions.⁴³⁰ This research is part of a movement to reveal and understand the "personal" and its interlinking with the

⁴²⁸ Wagner-Martin, p.5

⁴²⁹ Fairburn, *Social History*, p.8

⁴³⁰ Roberts, p.5

immediate and wider social context and political practices. And while a biography is more edited and "authored" by the writer, the oral history or sociological life history approach is more inclined to enable the individual subject to "speak".⁴³¹

The methodologies that practitioners of traditional biographies have developed to solve the problems associated with their subject matter (such as gaps in the life story where evidence is insubstantial, or dependence on unreliable source material such as letters and diaries) are, however, not equipped to solve the problems associated with the subject matter of social historians. As Fairburn states in the introduction to Social History, his overall objective in the book

is to persuade readers that methodological inventiveness and skill are often as important to the growth of knowledge as the ability to formulate original hypotheses and the discovery of new and rich sources of raw data; and that we can construct better arguments in support of our claims, design our research more purposefully, ask sharper questions, deepen our understanding of what is going on inside the texts produced by others, and to make our own works more interesting, by being much more conscious of methodological principles.⁴³²

Fairburn has used this sociological approach, with its methodological inventiveness and the formulation of original hypotheses in his biography of Cox, in order to investigate the lives of working men in colonial New Zealand. As well, he shows how biographical research, and by extension, the art of biography itself, may also be used for a variety of empirical and theoretical purposes and is applicable to both historical research and contemporary social issues.

⁴³¹ Roberts, p.52

⁴³² Fairburn, Social History, p.9

CONCLUSION

The focus of this thesis has been intellectual and literary history within New Zealand biography. Its central argument has been that biographical writing in New Zealand changed during the twentieth century in answer to varying questions and needs concerning the intersection between history, society and individual experience which the genre of biography feeds. Initial assumptions were that as a peculiarly time-bound genre, biographical writing in New Zealand would develop in a straightforward manner changed by a maturing national consciousness and by trends in contemporary literary history. But it was not as simple as that. There were found to be similarities between biographies from the two chosen decades, the 1940s and the 1990s, as well as differences. For every generalization that could be made, in this relatively small study, there were exceptions. While the selected case studies were all representative of types, all types were not represented. Nevertheless, those that were selected served to illustrate many of the changes in biographical writing of and by New Zealanders that had occurred during the fifty years under review. These changes were part of a general biographical approach that spanned a wide range of disciplines.

There was an expansion in the range of subjects to include "ordinary" men, and women, and those representative of types, but "great" men, reinvented as new "heroes", still claimed biographers' attention. The relationship between the biographer and subject became more impartial, yet those with a close relationship maintained subjectivity. The study of the fuller "life" that is so typical of late twentieth century biographical writing became dominant, rather than glimpsing the individual through the selective portions obtained by earlier methods, but those authors who dealt with living subjects, or those with whom they had a close personal relationship, were limited in what they were prepared to reveal. Those biographies that were one of a series written about the same subject revealed the conundrum of shifting perspectives and the elusive nature of truth. Despite the wider variety of forms, New Zealand biographies, for the most part, remained conservative, employing conventional narrative techniques with a chronological pattern

of life delivered with some general assessment. There was only one in this study that was experimental or innovative in presentation. The use of psychological theory was limited to a "commonsense" approach in a few of these case studies. In the example of literary biography, literary criticism was disallowed and is therefore absent. Feminism had an influence on those women authors writing about female subjects by highlighting gender differences, the special challenges involved in writing the lives of women, and the kinds of facts that were considered interesting to women readers. In most cases the biographers as a group took advantage of the greater availability of sources, and the increased professionalism of biographical writing meant that biographies became better documented.

Some of the conclusions reached are speculative. It can never be proved, after all, that a life in the past was rooted in something more general. It can only be inferred that it was, and that events, crises, ideas influenced the subject, while being aware of how difficult, impossible, it is to capture an individual life, no less than an entire decade. Evaluation of the selected biographies was made more difficult by the need to take into account contemporary social history and the major cultural shifts in New Zealand between the 1940s and the 1990s. It was further complicated because no firm principles or guidelines have been established for biography. The best of those discussed in the study, while displaying some developments from the earlier 1940s mode to the later 1990s mode within the historical context, have taken their shape from the individual characteristics of the biographer or the subject, and the relationship between them. It is on this basis that it was possible to analyse the changes in the form and nature of biographical writing in New Zealand between the two decades. And, as Holroyd predicts, "biography will continue to change, will become more personal, more idiosyncratic, imaginative, experimental, more hybrid, and will move further from the comprehensive 'Life and Letters' structure."⁴³³ Biography began as a reinforcement of the existing order. By re-examining the past and pointing it in a new direction, it may now be used to question our understanding of the present and affect our vision of the future.

⁴³³ Michael Holroyd, *Works on Paper: The craft of biography and autobiography*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2002, p.30

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